Love at First Fight

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Love at First Fight

by EarthsickWithoutYou

Summary

King Char is hoping to find his true love, although he sensibly regards it as a slim possibility. Between his royal duties and celebrity status, meeting "the one" seems harder than ever, and it can't be a pressing concern, lest he neglect his subjects.

Kaecilius gave up on "love" many years ago, and now merely wishes to enjoy the power he wrested from Dormammu when he killed the evil entity and took over the Dark Dimension. Taking it upon himself to build new temples and spread his power near and far, he arrives in Lamia expecting nothing but an easy new conquest.

Yet from the moment the young King and cynical Sorcerer set eyes on each other, "easy" suddenly disappears. And an absolutely *maddening* new challenge is suddenly irresistible to them both.

Notes

Thanks to Alisha for another charming prompt 🪄👑💛

See the end of the work for more notes

Worlds Apart

Charmont had been King of Lamia for one year and seven months, and in that time he had heard dozens of concerns and complaints from his subjects. He took time in the afternoon to hold an open question and answer forum in the throne room.

All Lamian subjects were invited to attend and notify him of matters requiring help…or very occasionally a trip to the dungeon if a serious crime occurred.

But these disputes and rare crimes were all to be expected, particularly in a realm which had festered in civil unrest for too long under King Edgar's rule. His evil uncle had severely damaged the peace which had existed when Char's father ruled the land. Char had to spend so much time and energy trying to repair the social and economic rift, plus discriminations between races – human, elf, giant, fairy, ogre – that he may have neglected to pay attention to the possibility of external threats.

Since Char could remember, and from anything his parents or the elders in the Royal Council recalled, there had never been a conquest attempt or other violent outbreak between Lamia and anyplace else. In one way it was obviously convenient. With so many problems among Lamians, they hardly needed battles with external forces.

But within his blind spot, there was the inevitable reminder that at some point, there was bound to be a new threat to the fairy-tale innocence of this fantastic land, an innocence Char was fighting hard to regain. It was about to become much trickier.

The afternoon's meeting with his subjects began ordinarily enough. Char had just finished reading a letter from his best friend Ella, who was traveling the world now that she could do as she pleased. He no longer thought of Ella as a romantic partner, so it wasn't that which made him feel jealous while reading of her exciting adventures. It was simply that nothing extraordinary had happened to Char in too long, and when he wasn't stressed, overburdened by responsibility – being the sole voice of reason among unruly subjects too many times to count –he was exhausted. And rather bored.

Still, he forced a bland smile on his handsome face and sat at regal attention when the latest long line of subjects came into the throne room to announce their issues and seek his help. Char liked them to know he was not an untouchable and lofty figurehead, but a man with progressive thoughts and deep feelings, ambitions, dreams…he was a person just the same as they were.

But someone forgot to tell the hordes of fans who had not toned down their aggressive idolization of the "dreamy" royal once he became King. Char had hoped that since he was no longer a "teen idol," he might – naturally – stop appearing on the cover of Medieval Teen every single month.

But he still received many stacks of love letters every day, and anytime he went out he had to take backroads and wear a hood if he wanted to avoid his admirers discovering him.

All of the frilly underthings and flowers thrown at him, and the big signs declaring him "Love of My Life" to some complete stranger and "The Dreamiest!" by another…all of that only reminded Char he was alone, when it came down to it. How could he hope to find love or even make friends in a kingdom where everyone saw him as a "Heartthrob"?

Furthermore, during the afternoon consultations, subjects often seemed to take advantage of his liberality by pushing Char for more – more privileges, more forgiveness of small crimes among neighbors, anything they could get. He even wondered if he was too "soft" to fully command their respect, but he did not know any other way to be.

Some of the elves were singing a dramatic, traditional folk tune while the fairies gossiped, keeping close ranks with whispers they covered with a faint bell-ringing sound, and the giants were bickering with humans.

It seemed like a lot of racket to bring into the beautiful throne room, with its shades of deep crimson and shining gold, its stately portraits of former rulers and large windows showing that it was a glorious day outside. At least if he had to be stuck indoors, Char would have preferred a little peace and quiet.

Contenting himself with listless thoughts of having a long ride through the fields and along the shining sea later, Char did his best to remain patiently attentive.

The first few issues were resolved easily, typical and mild as they were. But then a tall, blonde lady giant stepped forward, having politely waited her turn despite towering over many others in the throne room. Thank goodness for the high cathedral-style ceilings! She also didn't join in her fellow giants' ongoing argument with some local human farmers, instead focused on some other subject that had her looking deeply concerned.

"Brumhilda, is that you?" Char asked, smiling in recognition. "It's been ages. How are you and Slannen?"

"We're well, sire," Brumhilda replied, curtsying. "Except that something rather disturbing seems to be happening in the Enchanted Forest. As the problem is so nearby, my community hopes you might be able to resolve it quickly."

Char noticed she had a grim look on her face that was quite uncharacteristic of her bubbly, fun-loving personality.

"Well, I'll certainly do everything in my power to help. Why don't you describe the problem to me, and we'll find a solution. Would you care to sit down? We have an area just here which would accommodate you." Char gestured to a large, velvet floor pillow big enough for a giant to sit on.

"It's kind of you, your majesty, but we haven't a moment to spare. Slannen and I were walking through the forest earlier, when we noticed a strange sort of magic wafting up from over the treetops. It wasn't Lamian magic, or not any we are familiar with. We crept closer to investigate, and discovered a tall, mysterious and strange man who seemed…not of our world."

“Not of our world?” Char leaned forward, intrigued and concerned. “Please, go on.”

“The magic this man controls is dark. One can simply feel that it is. He is…making a building…with nothing more than calculated movements of his hands, sire. He has no claim to the land, and we have a bad feeling about the entire situation. Really bad.”

“I can’t say I blame you.” Char stood quickly and asked his royal advisors to help the remaining subjects waiting in line to consult him.

Then he walked outside with Brumhilda, who described exactly where in the woods Char might find this ominous stranger.

After thanking the friendly giantess for her help, Char promised to bring word back as soon as he had solved the bizarre stranger’s intrusion and… building project?

He made his way to the royal stables, thankful for his advisors being inundated with questions from subjects. Otherwise he certainly wouldn’t be able to take off on his own this way. However, this was a delicate situation and Char preferred an honest, direct approach. If he must do battle, he was prepared, armed with his sword. But he hoped that would not be necessary.

“Hello, girl,” Char said softly to his beautiful white horse, Moonbeam. She gave a soft whinny in greeting, happily accepting the sugar cubes he usually carried in his pockets. “We’re going for a ride to investigate a possibly nefarious stranger. Let’s hope it’s only a man who lost his way and…is perhaps confused. Maybe the man needs help and means no harm.”

He patted her head gently and Moonbeam gazed at him with her big brown eyes.

“You don’t think he’s harmless, do you? Well, you don’t have to give me that look, Moonie.” He climbed astride the mare, steering her to trot at medium speed towards the forest.

As usual he rode with his emerald green hood pulled up to conceal his face and kept to the less-used paths. Soon enough, he reached the clearing Brumhilda had described.

It would be unwise to approach aggressively. He slowed the horse down when he got closer to the trees where he could see bright, swirling purple lights blossoming up into the sky.

“Brumhilda was right, that’s no magic of our world.” Char frowned, determined to find out the truth, even as he naturally felt a bit afraid of what he might face.

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Kaecilius worked with a certain dull precision, moving his hands in the silent sorcerer’s language that compelled matter and energy itself to obey his whims. Now that he had defeated Dormammu and taken control of the Dark Dimension, there was nothing he could not have if he so chose.

However, he resolved to proceed with caution. The power of eternal life had nearly cost his own during the battle with Dormammu. He did not want to squander his power in any way, but to use it wisely, for the betterment of all life in the universe. His worst fear was to become

a distorted version of his former self, a hypocrite like the Ancient One, or a storm full of pure hatred and malice like Dormammu.

Therefore, Kaecilius' first task had been to marshall his forces, brave soldiers from his mortal fight on Earth, against that foolish Dr. Stephen Strange. His warriors were faithfully pledged to Kaecilius' noble cause, that of extending human life by leaving small amounts of magic from the Dark Dimension in strongholds throughout space, time and parallel universes. When he was finished, Kaecilius hoped to unite all worlds under a peaceful rule, carried out by himself of course, as the ultimate Sorcerer Supreme.

While his work was more than worthy and carried high purpose to his ambition, Kaecilius felt rather bored. Places were beginning to look very much alike to him the longer he traveled between dimensions and planets; meanwhile, he was beginning to feel more like a vessel of power than a man.

It surprised him that he still cared about his individual humanity; but what he had seen of the so-called "great oneness" had scared the truth into him quite forcefully. People could not all be merged into one eternal being. This would destroy the beauty and meaning which lay in each person's special and independent qualities. Even versions of the same people in different timelines and universes had their own personalities, their own dreams, visions and contributions.

Kaecilius witnessed what had become of Dormammu and the ancient men and women who had long served the evil entity. They were a horrific sight, an endless scream of madness, trapped together as if glued by the souls. What Dormammu had done with his magic was unnatural and perilous to the fact of existence itself.

It had only been because of his enormous will to survive and reverse the damage that Kaecilius fought the overwhelming urge within him to succumb as the other prisoners had. He could have become a mindless one seconds after Strange blasted him into the Dark Dimension, but instead he held onto himself. This was perhaps the one thing Dormammu never anticipated.

After this harrowing ordeal, Kaecilius' own desire to have a Self who was his own man began to grow. It kept bumping up against the massive amount of work he must constantly be doing, which was where his inner conflict had been chafing painfully of late. Kaecilius had no friends, only followers and enemies; he did not spend time with anyone unless he was in battle or issuing commands. Despite having a heart full of emotion and a secret craving for intimacy which slightly shamed him, there was no one in an universe who truly cared for Kaecilius, no one to show his feelings to so that they..meant something.

His hands moved mechanically, summoning what he needed to construct a temple in the woods of Lamia. It would provide a neat stronghold to guard the magic he would leave here before moving on, and none of the Lamians would be able to intrude. Defended by magic from another universe, the temple would be locked up tight, protecting the energy within.

The temples usually looked the same; a stack of rectangular sections, one atop the other, reaching to the sky. The floors in the building grew gradually more slender the further up they went. Although the place would never be used for anything other than a convenient

deposit point, it mildly pleased him to repeat his favorite design and imprint his vision across many universes. It was such a dignified, grand and imposing piece of architecture…

“Pardon me. What exactly is that eyesore you are erecting in my forest, sir?”

Kaecilius lowered his hands, pausing in his task as he turned to face the intruder.

A regal and stunning young man sat astride a lovely white horse. A sword was holstered by his side and he had a look of brave intensity about him which was oddly compelling.

However…

“Eyesore?” Kaecilius’ amber-brown eyes narrowed as the young man, a royal, he assumed, rode a bit closer. “Surely you are kidding.”

“I’m certainly not. Far be it for me to insult your aesthetic tastes, but since you’ve come into my kingdom as a complete outsider, then commandeered this large amount of previously unmarred rural land as your own without any permission from me, I don’t have the patience to feign admiration.”

“Your permission?” Kaecilius smothered a mocking laugh so that it emerged as a low chuckle instead. “How old are you, boy, twenty-three, twenty-four? A baby. Why should I care what you command and what permissions you give?”

“I happen to be twenty-two, for your information,” The handsome boy clarified in a haughty tone. “I am also Charmont, the King of Lamia and master of all I survey. You have come into my realm and practiced dangerous and unknown magic, while stealing land and sticking that… monstrosity in the ground like a flag of ownership. Did you truly think you could do all that without consequence?”

Since they were arguing, Charmont apparently decided that Kaecilius was not going to launch an attack on him anytime soon. Normally, that would be very far from a foregone conclusion, as Kaecilius had not changed that much. He still preferred to use enchanted brawn to resolve most conflicts, as it saved time. And it was one of the only forms of fun he had left.

But this boy was someone quite different. Kaecilius had been to more places than most people could begin to conceive, yet he had never laid eyes on such a perfect face, nor heard such a sweet voice. It defied his own logic that King Charmont’s stubborn anger and impetuous bickering were so…well, charming to him. How odd.

“That monstrosity,” Kaecilius maintained snobbishly, pointing at his glorious temple (which was almost finished), “Is a foothold in your dimension, which I shall use to leave a portion of Dark Dimensional magic behind to protect you and your people and give you a longer life. And it is also a marvel of beauty and splendor.”

“Beauty and splendor?” Char scoffed, placing his pretty hands on his hips.

The pose enhanced Kaecilius' view of his tiny waist. In a loose white shirt with a green cape flung over it, the King was absolutely flawless. Kaecilius' eyes lingered on the low neckline of the shirt and the smooth, youthful chest partially revealed. And then there was that long, gorgeous neck…the older man's mouth watered as sensations he'd not felt in ages came rushing back.

King Charmont's alabaster complexion, pink-flushed cheeks and soft brunette curls were peculiarly distracting to the cynical, almighty sorcerer. He was insulting Kaecilius' architecture and he was even more beautiful. But Kaecilius could fight this silly attraction and remain unscathed by earthly temptations…

Char went on indignantly, "Your glorious domain looks like a gigantic stack of dinner plates, left in a careless, crooked arrangement in someone's cosmic kitchen. What is that dreadful shade of orange?"

Kaecilius was offended, and let it show. "It isn't orange at all," he said tightly. "It's bronze."

"Whatever it is," Char retorted, "Please take it with you when you depart my kingdom. I will give you the same amount of time it took you to create this…orange dish stack in the sky. Twenty-four hours should be more than enough, I assume?"

"I'm not going to depart Larnia until I am done, and this wondrous, majestic, bronze-colored temple will remain here. I am giving you and your subjects an amazing, astonishing gift. You should bow to me in gratitude and beg my forgiveness for your rude remarks."

"First of all, I am the one people kneel to around here. Secondly, this kingdom is called Lamia, not Larnia. I believe Larnia is the kingdom with the famous magical wardrobe in it, where it is always winter and never Christmas. You seem out of sorts, sir, are you feeling well? You must be aware that your behavior is inappropriately presumptuous, damaging and abhorrent."

"Lately, no, I'm not feeling well." Kaecilius began to pace sullenly. He was soon aware of the boy's crystal blue gaze following his figure, noticing his strong body and how it looked in his snug-fitting tunic.

He glanced at the young King, whose inquisitive gaze now traveled to his eyes, which were ringed with dark purple and outlined silver, his formally smooth, golden skin cracked around the area. Char swallowed hard, continuing to scrutinize Kaecilius' appearance while waiting for the older man to explain. His curious, bright blue eyes flitted over the sharp lines of Kaecilius' chiseled features, then back to his broad shoulders, where Char could see that his long, silver hair was neatly gathered back from his face in a complicated and severe style.

"I've achieved absolute power," Kaecilius elaborated, amused by the boy's staring, but still mired in his own troubles. "Yet it leaves me feeling hollow, with an aftertaste of unfulfilled meaning. The answers cease to matter now that I know every single one, and I miss the questions."

"I'm sorry for your malady," Char said with sympathy, "But nobody truly knows everything."

Kaecilius stopped pacing, his features taken over by a snarl as he advanced on the King slowly. “I do. Once I was a mere apprentice to the Ancient One, but with my acolytes and the strength of my convictions, I rose to a grandeur far exceeding hers. I transcended the Masters of Mystic Arts and charted my own unique path, seeking to grant all of creation eternal life as part of The One. These are not accomplishments to turn your nose up at.”

“Sorry, there’s…The Ancient One, and then there’s The One who you want us all to become part of? Who is that?” Char’s brow crinkled adorably in confusion.

“I don’t seek eternal life as part of the One anymore. I learned that I had been misled to believe this was a solution to the plagues of illness and death, the enemy that is time. Instead, all life must remain wholly itself, infused by small doses of my healing element from the Dark Dimension. This will allow most people to live much longer in good health, at least delaying death until I find another way to eliminate it.”

“Eliminate…death?” Char raised his eyebrows. “Do you realize how that sounds? You’re ranting. You also just proved you don’t know everything and that you’ve learned harsh lessons on your journey of enlightenment, despite all that marvelous Dark Power of yours. You don’t know me and you don’t know my kingdom. Even if you did, that would not give you the right to impose your will on millions of lifeforms. Your entire logic in the plan seems wobbly.”

“I am the ruler of the Dark Dimension. I am so powerful that I and I alone defeated the horrific and beastly threat to all life which was Dormammu. You are merely the King of one realm like countless others; this is just a place. I am beyond your comprehension, as is my work.”

Char stared at him in disbelief. “It is beyond my comprehension that any man can be so unbelievably full of himself, arrogant and presumptuous, not to mention dangerous! Who gave you the right?”

They were slowly approaching each other in the large clearing which was crowned by fine, healthy green trees. The temple towered over them like two different threats at once, Kaecilius’ claim and Char’s objection, but the men only seemed to see each other.

“I took the right,” Kaecilius announced, puffing his chest with an air of authority. “As an all-powerful being. I don’t need to repeat my credentials and accomplishments, do I?”

“I would do almost anything to avoid your dubious and vain autobiography, actually.” Char held his ground as Kaecilius finally came so close that the younger man had to stop his own slow advance towards the potential enemy.

“Who here is vain?” Kaecilius felt slightly dizzy from the nearness of Charmont, the warmth of his sensuous body, his wonderful scent of exotic fruit and luscious flowers.

As such, the sorcerer had no choice but to continue insulting him. “Your kingdom looks like Disney World in a glitter globe. The air here smells of sugar cookies, and you have singing elves, actual singing elves, making a racket all day and night, incidentally. This realm is just a

cute, innocent afterthought in the grand scheme of existence. You do not have the authority…"

Their eyes met with searing gazes. When Char looked directly at Kaecilius' lips, the older man realized with a jolt of excitement that the King did not find his features repulsive. Quite the opposite, in fact.

The dark sorcerer repressed his attraction and growing desire, but it smoldered in him, making his eyes darken as his muscles tensed. Refusing to break off eye contact, he looked down several inches at this beautiful little King. The increased anger and self-conscious flush in Charmont's face caused Kaecilius to lick his lips.

"What is Disney World? And stop making the assumption that all elves sing. Some of them are lawyers," Char said, wagging a finger at him.

"Never mind. Perhaps if the elves ever shut up, I wouldn't generalize."

"You're one to talk. Speaking of which, might I request your name, ruler of the Dark Dimension? I assume you have one," Char said with a huff, "Other than God."

"My name is Kaecilius. But you may call me God if you like, it is up to you." He crossed his arms proudly with a flex of his large, toned biceps.

"Are you attempting to flirt with me? Sorry, that won't distract me from your blatantly criminal behavior on my lands." Char was blushing more deeply and could no longer meet Kaecilius' mischievous, twinkling eyes.

"That is up to you as well. If the attention is unwanted, we can set the idea aside, of course. I do believe I am starting to know you, King Charmont. You are a curious, stubborn creature, totally out of your depth, although you are beautiful, even uncommonly so, and I have *seen* beauty."

Char crossed his arms and took a step back to put space between them. "Your…backhanded compliments have no effect on me, Kaecilius. "You can't charm me into stupidly allowing you to use my kingdom as a decorative feather in your cap."

"I am trying to protect your kingdom." Kaecilius rolled his eyes with a groan.

"I don't recall asking for your help."

Without realizing it, Char had stepped into the sorcerer's personal space again.

"You're not my King," Kaecilius argued softly.

"I am," Char replied in a sensual, conflicted murmur. "While you are here, you shall abide by my laws or face the royal court of which I am in charge. And I'm not disposed to be merciful."

"You don't have the power to stop me."

Char raised his eyebrows with a defiant scowl that made heat coil tightly in Kaecilius' low belly, quickly coursing downwards. The boy was so beautiful when he was angry that it seemed unfair.

At that moment, they were interrupted by a bright splash of violet energy which suddenly jumped over them, headed right for the temple.

Kaecilius instantly turned around, and, right at the moment the temple began to crumble from being struck by the magic, he reassembled it. It stood tall and proud once again, but his flirtatious mood was soured.

"Who are you?" Char was demanding of three hooded figures who stood with their hands raised in quietly threatening configurations designed for quick spell weaving.

"Lower your hands," Kaecilius snapped, striding from Char's side to the three mysterious, monk-like figures. "And if you have the audacity to follow me on my travels, or to attempt to wreck my hard work and my ongoing plan, you also ought to have the bravery to speak up and explain yourself."

"Master Kaecilius." One of the nefarious trio lowered his hood, revealing cold and narrow features, with a shaved head, hawk-like nose, bitter gray eyes and an overall attitude of condescension.

"Agrus?" Kaecilius asked in disbelief that quickly solidified to resignation and self-defense. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Perhaps he doesn't like orange either," Char muttered, annoyed that now there were three more threatening outsiders when he'd had his hands full dealing with the first.

"It's bronze," Kaecilius retorted without turning around, keeping his focus in the opposite direction of where it would naturally land (on King Charmont).

As he stared Agrus down, the other sorcerer regarded him with haughty disdain.

"It's obvious why we are here, but I see that the blow to your ego has rendered you blind to simple facts. This is an insurrection. We mean to knock you off your throne of lies and wrest the power of the Dark Dimension for ourselves to use as we see fit."

The sorcerers next to Agrus lowered their hoods, revealing matching severely shorn hair and defiant smirks which the insurgents apparently wore as part of the uniform.

"Ovius? Iqor? Would you truly abandon your vowed and sacred loyalty to my rule, only to ally yourself with this foolish narcissist? His bragging is nothing but pathetic delusions of grandeur."

"It's already done, Master Kaecilius," sneered Iqor. "We know you've been hoarding all of the magic for yourself, as the Ancient One did, and as you swore never to do. Perhaps power truly does corrupt. But we still seek to put the magic to the use which would be truly beneficial to all life."

“I’m not hoarding it. You see – and have seen, since you’ve been following me, I assume – I’m building temples in every world, leaving Dark Dimensional magic and power behind in small, but potent doses.”

One of the two men flanking Agrus accused, “You’re hiding your treasure like a wicked pirate king, is what you are doing. Spreading it out in too many places for us to find and gather it up again. Do we look like ignorant buffoons to you, that you think we’d believe such a transparent plot to be genuine or honorable?”

“Ovius, you are a particular disappointment. You were among my favorite students and later a trusted disciple. Now, I’m sorry to say that yes,” Kaecilius hissed, “You do look like ignorant buffoons. I shall give you one chance to recant your vicious falsehoods and repent with a full confession and apology to me, or face consequences as I see fit.”

“I don’t think they intend to recant or repent,” Char whispered, having stepped closer and stopped by his side in a cute sort of solidarity which – despite all his distraction – touched Kaecilius’ cold, black heart.

“Yes, I know,” Kaecilius said, tossing the King a smug smile. Whispering, he added, “But it makes me look better if I give them a chance to do the right thing before I do this.”

As his former acolytes began summoning spells to take Kaecilius down, their master drew a circle in open air, creating a portal to some dark, swirling, hellish place. Char’s jaw dropped as Kaecilius flicked his hand once and sent the portal flying until it stopped beside the insurgents. He repeated the motion with a blase, but self-satisfied expression, and all three traitors were sucked directly into the portal, howling in objection and vowing revenge.

“Young fools,” he chuckled, moving his hands in another fast and simple gesture to close the portal. “They ought to have known better than to confront me, but perhaps they thought if the Dark Dimensional power had been split up and spread across universes, I might have weakened myself for the time being. Absurd.”

“I,” Char began weakly, too shocked by what he had witnessed and in need of a few moments to collect himself.

Kaecilius nodded. “You?” Finally, now, the handsome boy must be impressed with him.

“I demand to know where you sent those rebels, plus what they will do if they escape and return.” Char did not look amazed, but instead, critical and afraid of yet more trouble in the future.

With a thrum of unexpected jealousy, Kaecilius found himself wishing Char was that fiercely protective about him instead of the Lamians.

“They can’t escape, I sent them to the negative zone. They could float in there, tiny and helpless as molecules, forever.”

Char put his head in his hand for a moment. Raising it in stressed irritation, he asked, “What do you mean, they could? So there’s a chance they could make it back here and exact their

vengeance? I don't like keeping a risk like that open and unprotected, Kaecilius. So please, come up with a solution, quickly."

"You don't have a choice, my dear King." Kaecilius found kindness softening his tone. "I'm sorry, but you'll have to trust me. I can't stay here waiting around and defending your realm in case those ne'er-do-wells escape."

"That's exactly what you need to do, as that is the fair thing to give us after exposing Lamia to such unnecessary danger. How do you even know those three were the only members of this insurrection? An army could arrive here at any moment, and you speak of abandoning us to such a fate?"

"Well." Kaecilius paused, brow furrowed as his mind seemed empty of a suitable argument. "There can't be an army," he finally stated, "Because that many disciples would never rise up against me. I'm beloved among the vast majority of them. I also need to move on and keep spreading the power, protecting and edifying many more worlds that remain for me to visit."

"And I need you here," Char insisted. "We'll just have to make some sort of deal. Is there anything we have, or that I have, in Lamia which would serve as an appropriate balancing gesture?"

"I want for nothing, Charmont." Kaecilius gazed at him, realizing as he said this that it was no longer true.

The low, throaty tone of this annoying intruder did strange things to Char's calmly justified composure. He cleared his throat and continued.

"Fine. Then don't you think it would be advantageous to join our two kingdoms in an alliance? We may not be of the Dark Dimension, but many of our fairies and sorcerers possess great power. This could provide you with an army in the case of more trouble with those or other rebellions that may arise."

"That does sound advantageous," Kaecilius nodded. "It also seems like it would be confusing to the people. Sudden and abrupt, expecting them to drop everything when needed and rush into battle. Expecting them to accept my open presence in their realm."

"Precisely." Char sat down on a large rock behind Kaecilius, who automatically turned to look at him in perplexity.

Char leaned back and looked up at the debatably ugly temple, then the cheerful blue sky above it, peaceful and serene. With a sigh, he returned his vivid cerulean gaze to Kaecilius' waiting dark amber one.

"That is why we shall have to get married."

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"Yes, marriage," Char said briskly to his advisors when he had returned to the castle with the big announcement. "Truth be told, a marriage of convenience to anchor a vitally necessary

alliance. But this information won't leave the room, is that understood?"

They did understand, especially when Char honestly laid out the events which had transpired in the forest, and his own manner of protecting the Lamian people against any future threats from the Dark Dimension.

Still, it was a strange matter to begin planning a grand royal wedding to a man Char barely knew, and on top of that, did not much like, and blamed for this entire mess, and worse still, a man to whom he was abominably attracted.

The marriage was to be platonic, which was understood between them both. While they had drawn up the magical marriage contract, Kaecilius added in a line: "unless the King and his husband decide that they would like to have a romantic relationship."

"Why would we do that?" Char had asked, annoyed by the amusement in Kaecilius' dark, compelling eyes.

He should be angrier than he was at such implications and joking around when this marriage was a serious matter of the kingdom's security. He should also be repelled and frightened by Kaecilius' dark power, turned off by the huge ego and the large, purple and black rings surrounding his pretty and deep eyes. Instead, the markings only enhanced profoundly handsome and noble features, and the man's self-confident boasting made Char feel a bizarre sort of…excitement.

But it was not exciting to walk down the aisle and wed himself in the royal chapel to this silly man, and Char was relieved Ella couldn't make it back in time for the rushed ceremony. He could fake love and commitment in the eyes of his people for their own sakes, but the presence of his best friend, the person who knew him best, his facade might fall away like the mask it was.

There was no denying Kaecilius looked divine in the suit which the royal dressers had made him, silver and white to compliment Char's own marital attire. Char's outfit included his crown and royal cape, and had the colors used in the opposite places from Kaecilius'.

Despite the greater regality of Char's appearance, he did not feel anywhere near as confident and capable as the older man did, waiting for him at the front of the chapel.

Slannen, Char's elf friend who was to perform the ceremony, seemed perplexed by the speed of the whole operation, yet intrigued and impressed by Char's choice of spouse.

Indeed, it was difficult for anyone not to be intrigued, impressed and even desirous, or perhaps that was just how Char felt, much to his continued frustration of the fact.

The ceremony seemed to go by in a blur; the only time Char could bring himself to meet Kaecilius' gaze was when he actually had to speak the vows of eternal devotion. Embarrassingly, Char's voice trembled, which might seem like "true love" making him nervous instead of "marrying a stranger he did not like but was highly attracted to" nervous.

When Char's voice wavered, Kaecilius' eyes warmed and he smiled in a purely admiring way that helped Char to make it through the florid and overlong series of vows.

Kaecilius, on the other hand, took to the traditional Lamian wedding conventions with great ease. He had already memorized his own vows and spoke them with clarity in that deep, velvety voice of his.

The people, at least, were happy to see their King settled with a spouse, as traditional expectations did still side with the monarch being wed – for greater stability. Char could have laughed. How ironic, that the marriage was about stability for Lamia, but it had nothing whatsoever to do with love, happiness or a lifetime of support.

"You can stay here in the palace anytime you like," Char said curtly when finally escaping the wedding reception. "Or you may, of course, make another place your home. So long as you stay out of mischief."

"That could be hard," Kaecilius deadpanned.

Servants and subjects stared at the new couple as the bustling party went on in merriment. It would continue long after Char was in bed, safe from the racket and false joy. Marriage of inconvenience was more like it.

"It could be hard because you are mischief personified," Char laughed. He relaxed a tiny bit. "Thank you, Kaecilius. It's been a long day and you've done your duty. I'm going up to bed and leaving you to your own devices."

Kaecilius' smile faded. "No more dances left for your husband, Majesty?"

"I think we both know where more dancing would lead. And why this marriage should remain uncomplicated by any ill-advised trysts. We can hardly carry on diplomatic relations if we're burdened by unresolved feelings or avoidable arguments."

"Why are you so certain that opening the door to closeness between us would be an ill-advised tryst?" Kaecilius was torn between excitement that Char acknowledged their attraction being mutual, and disappointment that the King dismissed the idea of them as a couple before it could even have a chance.

Char could see the feelings on his face, and it made his own stomach sink in regret for having to speak plainly about these delicate matters. He did not expect to be the one who could make this chilly, composed warrior and dark sorcerer supreme show his emotions with vulnerability. And it scared Char, perhaps.

"I just…think it seems like…" Char scratched the back of his head, fluffed his curls, bit his lip, fidgeted and stared at the half-eaten buffet on the long table behind them without really seeing it.

He still saw Kaecilius' intensely smoldering, lovely eyes, no matter where else he looked.

“You aren’t the commitment type. You said that you travel constantly. Do you even have a home?”

“I did not have one until now. You just offered me one.”

Char raised his eyebrows and nibbled his by-now over bitten lip. “You think of this place as home?”

“I have no other, haven’t in years,” Kaecilius admitted. “I tried to tell myself it was because the life of a sorcerer should be one of happy deprivation; we don’t seek material ownership or distract ourselves from the sacred teachings by looking for romance. But now that I’ve spent time with you, Charmont…I’m changing my mind. I think that all the while, I was terrified of love, and these were excuses to keep me clear of it. If I kept moving, I’d never be slowed down by my human need for connection, companionship…well, that was quite a speech. I’m sorry to have taken up so much of your time.”

“Kae,” Char blurted. He didn’t know why he blurted the nickname, but it made his heart quicken. A special name which only he used for his husband.

Kaecilius paused before leaving the banquet room, but only to lean down with courtly manners and kiss Char’s hand. “Goodnight, then, my King.”

“Goodnight, husband,” Char whispered after watching Kaecilius’ tall, strong, manly figure and his beautiful silver hair and his searing amber gaze disappearing from view.

Opposite energy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A few days passed after the wedding, and Char kept busy, mainly because he didn't have a choice. Although his newly wedded state and husband took up a large portion of his thoughts, he was required to attend two time-consuming council meetings to settle land ownership agreements between humans and giants.

It took him three separate letters to convince Ella he had truly married, and yes while she was away, to a perfect stranger, who was a sorcerer from the actual Dark Dimension.

"*I know you're making that up. If there really was a 'dark dimension,' they'd call it something much more impressive than that! I think this little joke has gone on long enough, Char. How are things* ***really*** *going?*"

Once he verified the existence of Kaecilius by sending her a copy of the latest Lamia Daily News issue, he found her once again shocked to the point of disbelief at him not taking a honeymoon (!).

"It's a marriage of convenience," he wrote. "We don't need a vacation to celebrate our nonexistent happiness together."

"I find you less convincing, the more you write to me about Kaecilius, claiming that you don't care for him. I mean…I've ***seen*** *his picture. You say that this marriage is merely a protective measure, a political matter. Something sounds too enigmatic and defensive in that. Why not go away together and see if you do have chemistry? You're married anyway, what can it hurt? Is he too attractive for you to risk that, and possibly lose your heart in the bargain?"*

"'What can it hurt'? *Me*," Char grumbled exhaustedly. It was late at night, he wasn't even sure how late…past midnight, anyway.

He'd been at his desk signing various official papers and replying to letters for over two hours, and he wanted nothing more than to go to bed right then. But his empty stomach was savagely unwilling to allow it unless he appeased his growling appetite for having skipped dinner.

Although working too hard was nothing new for the King, skipping meals was. His stomach seemed unusually sensitive, fluttery and nervous lately, and his state of mind was never calm. He no longer felt like his steady, reliable self. How could it be a result of his husband's presence in the castle? After all, they barely ever crossed paths, and when they did, their conversations were cordial, but brief and essentially empty.

Char knew it was because of Kaecilius, though.

What else has changed in my life? Nothing else. Just him. And this marriage that…I have no idea how to feel about.

There was also no other explanation as to why he thought of the man so often, not about the danger of Kaecilius' power or the possible nefarious intentions the sorcerer might well be hiding. But he wondered if his husband was comfortable, well, and if he was…happy.

Kaecilius looked like a wounded puppy when they met in the halls, if the wounded puppy was trying to act like the toughest, most emotionally impervious man on earth. Char wished to make a friendly gesture, to smooth things over after their somewhat adversarial journey to marriage…not to mention their awkward conversation after the wedding.

But his husband was always in a hurry. Kaecilius constantly claimed to be working on some project or research study, or needing to meditate, or go to the village to buy certain sorts of candles to light when he meditated.

"We have lots of candles here," Char had said, his brow knitted in confusion. "And I'm pretty certain you could change it to whatever scent you pleased. Why go all that way?"

"Far be it for me to take up your majesty's time with my trifles. If you'll excuse me." And Kaecilius brushed past him with a business-like demeanor. His eyes showed a repressed, deeper struggle.

It was all quite confounding and frustrating. Char was the kind of man who wanted to solve his problems, not waste time in deliberating passively, and not running from them. He did not know if Kaecilius was a problem, per say, but the dark sorcerer's apparent admiration for him had come as a surprise that – in the moment – had overwhelmed him. Char had put his royal foot directly in his mouth while trying to process the knowledge that the attraction he felt was very much returned.

And now, he really did regret being so impetuous, dismissing Kaecilius as a romantic prospect before they ever had a chance to try. Ella had a point, although he was reluctant to admit it. They were married. And Char had been drawn to him all along, fascinated by his enigmatic and handsome figure, his great power and unusually high intelligence. Even Kaecilius' lesser traits, such as his obnoxious ego and his past sins as a villainous player in the magical realms…had their own darkly seductive appeal.

Char sat back in his desk chair with a grumpy exhale.

"Good Gods. What is wrong with me?" He tugged at his own curls in frustration, then cringed at the pain. "*Ouch.* I don't know what I'm doing anymore."

He felt unusually hot in his bedchamber, which was perfectly comfortable in temperature. Knowing it was once again thoughts of his wickedly gorgeous husband that heated his blood and skin, Char scowled at his own foolishness. He undid the top of his frilly white shirt, getting some extra air on his chest and neck, as he felt so uptight and sweaty. Only then did he realize he had never changed into his nightshirt…much as he had not gone to bed, for that matter.

It was sexy that Kaecilius threw his weight around and bragged, it was arousing that Char's husband was so confident and convinced of his own prowess. Now, obviously it wasn't that Char wanted to see Kaecilius this way, but it certainly could not be unseen!

Furthermore, the knowledge that Kaecilius was guilty of such serious crimes, had caused such danger to countless innocents…which ought to be utterly repellant! Unfortunately that, too, turned Char on far too much.

He felt his face growing even hotter at the wicked thoughts that made him feel guilty and needy for passionate sex with the one man who, ironically, he most likely could not have in bed, his own husband.

Is he ever even going to speak to me as an equal, a friend, a spouse, or at least something better than a pebble in his shoe?

But, Char decided, rising suddenly from his chair, he'd done nothing wrong! Kaecilius had no right to be or stay mad simply because of an understandable…misunderstanding.

Char picked up his royal cape, which had fallen to the floor as he stood. He flung it on the bed, put both hands on his shoulders, and sighed so hard that his curls swayed.

"I'm mad at him, as a matter of fact!" He told his reflection, "For still being mad at me. I've had quite enough, it's beginning to impact my peace of mind. I'll go and talk to him right now. No, I'm not worried in the least. I've every right to confront him on this issue."

He made to leave the room, but quickly darted back to the mirror, just to snap at his reflection, while pointing a finger at it, "*You*, shut up. You don't know anything. Don't you give me that look."

***

Kaecilius walked out of his private bathroom with a towel wrapped low around his hips, absent-mindedly slung on. A hot bath had not calmed his overactive mind, as he had hoped and planned.

As for the towel, he wondered why he even bothered covering up, living in this sort of… royal isolation. He could walk around this gorgeous and lonely suite of rooms naked, every night, for all the company he had! What was the difference?

It wasn't as if his husband was ever going to actually call upon him for conjugal duties, and to Kaecilius' mortification, not only had his sex drive come roaring back to life after a grief-driven sabbatical, but he only seemed to want Charmont.

If I didn't know any better, I'd swear that obnoxiously beautiful boy put a curse on me, one darker than any magic I possess.

His chambers were sumptuous, but tasteful, manly and to his taste. He hadn't changed a thing, since the burnt orange and burgundy shades of the decor suited him fine. It had nothing

to do with knowing that Char had gone to the inexplicable trouble of having the rooms redecorated in anticipation of his consort's residence in the castle.

By some strange coincidence, he also had a small collection of Char-related momentos in the bottom drawer of his dresser. Foolish as it was, he'd saved the damned newspaper clippings announcing their engagement and wedding, plus a little note His Majesty had sent the morning after their union, asking for Kaecilius to let him know if he ever needed anything at all, to be comfortable in his new home.

He had saved the flowers from the wedding and pressed them into his favorite book of spells, and then there was a long, slender blue ribbon on top of his ridiculous assortment of romantic contraband.

Kaecilius gave the ribbon a hard stare as he leaned over to survey the drawer of Char. His towel slipped off, as did his pride in himself when recalling the incident in which he had acquired that ribbon.

A few days ago, Char had been walking by him in the castle halls. As usual, they gave each other brief, confused, baffling words of greeting that seemed stand-offish, or not, who knew?

Even his own feelings were unclear to him. But it had certainly felt clear enough when he'd scooped that bit of glossy ribbon off the floor, following Char's swift escape from his presence. It was a piece of the longer ribbon just under the collar of Char's handsome, bright blue cape, the part which bound the cape together and kept it on his Majesty's royal person.

Only an idiot or a saboteur would keep, then hold onto, such a tiny oddity, imbuing it with a (sentimental) meaning which it clearly did not have. An idiot would be in love with King Charmont and entirely in over his head, with no escape in sight. An idiot would hold the ribbon sometimes when he slept at night because it made him feel better able to find peaceful slumber and sweet dreams.

A saboteur would snicker at the minuscule, but effective evil he'd done, hiding the ribbon which could have repaired the now loose cape.

But this would be an absurdly untalented saboteur. The King could have the cape repaired with a single word to any of the servants. Kaecilius sighed, running a hand over his loose, silver hair that hung damply over his broad, tanned shoulders and down to his upper back.

He may have retired from what might be considered all-out villainy (a category he considered malleable), but Kaecilius was still far too proud of his scheming skills for the "ribbon theft to ruin Char's day" theory to hold water.

Annoyed with his intolerable new situation in life, the Dark Sorcerer Supreme, ruler of the Dark Dimension with the ultimate power to control much of reality itself and mould the world(s) to any design he chose, sat down on his handsome four-poster bed, naked and staring at the blue ribbon wrapped around his finger.

It was little wonder he hardly slept anymore. He stayed up most nights reading, trying to learn more about Lamia whenever he wasn't increasing his knowledge of obscure and

forbidden spells. The latter was just in case the despicable uprising against him should recur, though he doubted it.

Staying in Lamia had very little purpose, in fact, if he wasn't the idiot. He had only agreed to the marriage and treatise of his guardianship over this realm because he had become besotted with Char faster than he could form opposing words or summon wisdom.

Wisdom still appeared to be eluding him, as he never expected to marry again, and suddenly being a husband again was surreal. For years, he had been determined never to love again after the tragic deaths of his wife and child. And yet here he was, in his late middle age, yet immortal; the most powerful Dark Sorcerer, and yet an idiot in love with a naive and inexperienced youth, a boy at least thirty years his junior.

And not having formed a plan for dealing with the impossible, he felt uncharacteristically disorganized. Well, perhaps he had better stop brooding on the matter and continue reading. If he could not find answers within Lamian stories and histories, nor in the ancient texts of sorcery, he could at least lull himself to sleep. Perhaps think about something other than his curly-haired, sassy-mouthed, petulant and far too beautiful spouse.

On this determination, he surveyed the neat piles of reading material on his nightstand, only to hear a knock at his door that startled him, causing him to drop two books on the floor and blurt "Who is it?" far too loudly.

A slightly muffled, proper and charming voice replied.

"It's me, um, Char…King Charmont. Uh, your husband."

That adorably curious and determined voice was a knife through his heart, and he was very eager to welcome the late night visitor, who seemed to have appeared from his repressed fantasies by magic, though he'd cast no such spell.

"I'll be right there!"

He was so eager to answer the door to his husband, he completely forgot that he was entirely naked. Only when he was on the point of putting his hand on the doorknob did he recall, and then, he summoned his large bath towel back from where he'd dropped it on the floor.

Hurriedly, blushing and cursing under his breath, he tied it around himself. He would get dressed shortly, but didn't want to leave Char waiting in the hall, perhaps thinking Kaecilius was stalling or wasn't pleased at the visit.

That done, he opened the door, hoping that by all of the highest deities in all dimensions, he would not say something stupid and ruin this encounter. Just this once!

Char looked stunning, as always, but particularly soft now. Kaecilius' heart skipped a beat and started thundering. Meanwhile, His Majesty's tentative smile of greeting changed when he set eyes on his half-naked, slightly damp husband. His pretty mouth dropped open, and he froze in place.

***

“Good evening, my King,” Kaecilius greeted with a wide smile that seemed entirely genuine, as if Char had made his night by stopping by. “Or almost morning, now, I suppose. I lost track of the time.”

“Did you?” Char inquired, attempting to restore his breathing and continue the possibility of cogent thought.

Kaecilius was first of all, babbling like a teenager with a crush. That was surprising enough to give Char pause.

Secondly, the sorcerer was most certainly *not* a teenager in his robust, muscular and beautiful physical form. His golden skin, rippling biceps, firm pectorals and silvery pelt of chest hair were “bad” enough (as in Char really did not want to become fully erect on this occasion, yet it was beginning to seem mortifyingly inevitable). But to make matters worse, Char was obligated to perceive (by virtue of his coincidental presence! He wasn’t trying to leer at his husband or anything, for goodness sake) that Kaecilius’ towel seemed to be straining, as if it might drop away at any moment.

This possibility was so thought-provoking in a sort of terrifying, lustful way, that he stared at Kaecilius’ sexy, slightly soft belly, then subtly down to the dips beneath the older man’s hips, which were entirely bare. Char could just about glimpse a slender trail of hair which seemed to provide a path to the sorcerer’s most private area.

“Yes,” Kaecilius said, in a kind of amused bafflement. He leaned down slightly to find Char’s gaze and led it gradually back up to his own.

That’s right, his eyes are up there. Which is the right place to look. I can do that.

Now that Char was studying Kaecilius’ uniquely sensuous face and looking into his deep amber eyes, ringed in dark purple, he couldn’t help it when his eyes wandered again, this time to his husband’s loose mane of long, lovely hair.

This immensely powerful sorcerer looked so huggable and gentle, so entirely relaxed and himself. Char had always wanted to see his pretty hair free of the severe way Kaecilius wore it pulled back during the daytime. It was even more appealing than he’d imagined. He could almost feel the shining, silver and gold strands wrapped around his fingers as he tugged restlessly, perhaps while Kaecilius was deep–

“I lost track of time, um, reading.” Kaecilius interrupted Char’s ingenious line of thought, then cleared his throat expectantly. “What brings you by my humble chambers, your majesty?”

“Wait, you’re practically naked,” Char argued, his brow furrowed in nearly scientific inquiry. This was a matter of grave importance, after all. “Do you always read in the nude?”

“Oh,” His husband replied brilliantly, “I wasn’t actually reading yet. I’d just taken a bath, and so, I was…drip-drying…while perusing my books and trying to choose one to read.”

“Drip-drying?” Char repeated, staring at his spouse’s physique again as his blush deepened.

Sheepishly, the older man explained, “I’m sorry for my informal state of attire, but I wanted to answer the door before you left. You might have thought I didn’t want to see you, but that’s not the case.”

“I can forgive your…casual appearance,” Char allowed, waving a hand as sexual frustration threatened to knock him over like a heavy ocean wave. “Ahem, I’m pleased to hear you don’t mind my visit. I was hoping we could, em, talk.”

“Of course, I’d be delighted. Do come in.” Kaecilius let his husband into his suite and added, “I can make some tea. Oh, but first I’ll just put something more decent on. It won’t take a moment.”

Char wanted to scream on the top of his lungs NOT to get dressed, but managed to repress the urge by covering his mouth hard with one hand while his eyes watered.

While his husband went into the bedroom to dress, Char set the satchel which he’d carried over one shoulder down on a chair. Then he wandered the room, studying the well-packed bookshelves and a desk with five different ponderous tomes, all left open to different pages, beside a stack of notes. The handwriting was beautiful. Char ran a finger over the delicate swirls of cursive, finding many words he couldn’t begin to understand. Complicated spells, he assumed.

It felt like an apt metaphor for the whole relationship. He wanted to get under Kaecilius’ emotional armor and truly know who this man was, and yet he was so slow to lower his own guard.

Char looked down at his hand, the one wearing a wedding ring, and turned the lovely bauble around his finger a few times. It fit just right. It felt as if he was meant to wear it for life, not merely for a temporary diplomatic arrangement. So how should he feel?

“Yours is beautiful,” Kaecilius observed, coming into the room again.

Char looked up and into his husband’s mysterious, honeyed gaze, wondering if there were many who did not see the sorcerer’s soft and vulnerable side because of his foreboding appearance…the marks of his harsh past battles. Or did Kaecilius not gaze at anyone else in quite this way?

“Your ring,” Kaecilius smiled, gesturing with his own hand to show the band he wore all day and night. “I like that the two pieces share a mirrored design theme, each the inverted colors of the other.”

“It was a lovely idea on the part of our royal jewelers,” Char concurred.

He felt strange, almost as though he was suddenly ill. Kaecilius’ presence seemed too large and distracting for him to quite deal with, this close.

The older man now wore a white nightshirt, similar to Char's own (back in his room). The King didn't know why, but for Kaecilius to appear in his night clothes felt almost as intimate as the towel, and more intentionally so. While the gown covered much more skin than the towel had, it was still flattering on the sorcerer, leaving his neck and upper chest bare and his long, toned legs on display. He had tossed his hair back in a simple, loose ponytail.

"Do I look absurd?" Kaecilius inquired, holding his arms to the sides, showing the elaborate embroidery of his elegant nightshirt. "I know this is not the clothing of my world…it is so different, yet it is very comfortable."

"Absurd?" Char shook his head, befuddled. "Why, of course not. You're a fine-looking man, Kaecilius. The shirt looks incredibly well on you. You look like one of us now."

His smile made Kaecilius' briefly overwhelmed expression soften. "I'm happy to hear you aren't repulsed by the marks on my face. Many are."

"Then they aren't worth knowing. Who wants to spend time around fools with no taste?"

Char enjoyed the way Kaecilius regarded him in surprise. The sorcerer opened his mouth to say something which would remain unknown, and closed it again. Instead, he remarked, "You are always so kind."

"I'm not. I actually came here with a peace offering, as I feel how abominably I've treated you with a sense of shame." Char's cheeks flamed as he opened the satchel, revealing the food he had brought from the kitchen: fresh butter, fresh-baked bread, and thick slices of cheese in a few varieties; all of it culled from the royal farmland, churned, baked and packed into the ice box this morning.

"I thought we could make, um, or I could show you how to make my favorite late night snack. And I can apologize for never letting you explain your feelings and views on…well, anything. Other than the long tangents about your great power, that is."

Kaecilius chuckled, coming closer. Slipping past Char closely, he gestured minutely at the fireplace, causing a healthy, blooming fire to instantly appear, flickering and crackling away as if it had been lit hours ago.

"You don't owe me any apologies, your majesty. I'd rather speak with you, even when we disagree, than most other people, anytime. A new inclination on my part. I usually prefer to have my own correctness a foregone conclusion."

"You don't say." Char looked at his husband with a bright smile, and his laugh burst out, bubbly and sweet. "Sorry."

"I can't order a King around, but…" Kaecilius paused beside Char, looked down at him and added, "Stop apologizing."

Char laughed self-consciously. "If you insist. Come, sit with me by the fire. We'll need it for the snack."

“Oh, but the tea,” Kaecilius fussed, only for Char to tug his hand and invite him to sit by his side on the rug in front of the fireplace.

“I have something that will go down much better at this hour, and for having a Serious Conversation.” Char pulled a last item from his satchel, a carefully plugged decanter of red wine.

“I have some glasses in the –”

Kaecilius paused as Char removed the stopper and drank straight from the bottle.

“Your royal highness,” the older man said with comical surprise, “You scandalize me!”

Char shrugged and winked. “It’s one of those nights.”

He passed the bottle to his husband and set about preparing two of his favorite “grilled cheese” snacks.

“This is delicious,” Kaecilius reflected, lowering the decanter and licking the berry-rich, full-bodied drink from his lips. “It’s been years since I’ve had a drink of alcohol.”

“Really?” Char raised his eyebrows, amused. “That explains a lot.”

Wine almost shot out of Kaecilius’ nostrils as he barely held back another laugh. “You can’t call *me* the uptight one in the relationship.”

Kaecilius set the wine down on the floor, watching as his young husband tore the bread into chunks and slid them onto skewers, alternating them with pieces of cheese.

“I mean,” Kaecilius rushed to add, since Char gave him a look which was unreadable, except that it was curious. “The…arranged or fake relationship.”

“Whatever else it may be, our relationship isn’t fake.” Char handed a loaded skewer to Kaecilius and met his eyes with a steady blue gaze.

Strange, the way he and I seem to stabilize each other.

“If we are to be friends, that’s real. And I only share my favorite wine and snack with my friends. What do you say?”

“I agree, of course, your highness. After all, it will…be more beneficial to our arrangement if we become friends. And learn to get along. Liking each other certainly isn’t the problem.”

Kaecilius seemed glum all of a sudden. He averted his eyes from Char and moved to take a bite of the snack.

“No, not like that,” Char giggled.

He put a hand on his husband’s to discourage snacking on the bread and cheese before further preparations were made.

Char felt a magic in the gentle touch that set his heart racing. Kaecilius was so warm, firm, strong, and most of all, beautiful. This magic wasn't the sort which fairies or sorcerers practiced; it was the kind that only two people in love could find, together. That's why Char was begging the Gods above that this affection wasn't one-sided.

"Watch me," he prompted nervously, noticing that before he urged this, Kaecilius was staring at his own hand, where Char had touched him.

"Ah, I see." Kaecilius chuckled good-naturedly, watching as Char carefully warmed the bread and cheese by holding it to the flames, whereupon the cheese began to melt and the snack did indeed look twice as tasty.

"I recommend taking it out after about fifteen seconds of melting, or it will be too gooey." Char said expertly.

"There we go." As the older man warmed his own snack, Char took a sip of wine, letting his bread and cheese cool for a minute before eating.

Thoughtfully, he said, "Kaecilius, I don't want to be friends only to strengthen our arrangement. It's because I like you."

"Me?" Kaecilius' eyes widened; he finished with the skewer and brought it away from the fire. "Are you sure? That's not exactly a popular opinion."

"Too bad," Char smiled mischievously. "I like you anyway."

He was suddenly aware that they were sitting very near to each other on the soft, brown rug as they ate their snack in companionable enjoyment.

The firelight cast shades of hazy orange and yellow over his husband's sharp cheekbones and strong jawline, and the shining locks of his long hair. Kaecilius' nightshirt was beginning to slip down one shoulder, and Char wished he could kiss his husband's skin just there.

With his lips burning at the mere thought, Char did his best to eat without choking or talking with his mouth full, neither of which was usually an issue for him.

"I like you, too, a great deal. And while this is less surprising, considering your enormous popularity," Kaecilius mused, fiddling with the food on his skewer, "I never like anyone. I haven't in years. So it's a testament to your character that I have a soft spot for you, Majesty."

"Hmm. I suppose I can relate to that, seeing as I often don't feel that I know anybody. Not really. Everyone either worships me, cowers from me, resents me or flatters me. None of which has anything to do with me. The only person I've been close with since my parents' deaths is Ella, my best friend."

"Ella?" Kaecilius nodded slowly. "I've seen her likeness in the papers. The word is that you two were once engaged. I hope I didn't ruin your chance to marry where your heart truly lies."

Char could have sworn his husband was jealous, and the possibility sent a potent jolt of arousal through him. *Oh, dear me…*

"No, absolutely not." Char spoke so emphatically, he startled himself. With the wine relaxing him a bit and his tongue therefore loosened, it was easier to open up more. "Ella and I were briefly engaged, but we decided we preferred being friends. We weren't really in love, just too inexperienced, at first, to know the difference. Once we got to know ourselves and each other a bit more as adults, Ella wished to travel the world, to fully experience her freedom. I knew that while I may never meet my 'one true love,' at least if I do fall in love, I'll be sure. There won't be any second-guessing."

"You're right, there probably won't be." A sad tenderness in Kaecilius' noble profile tugged on Char's heartstrings.

"Have you been married, Kaecilius? I mean, married before?"

Kaecilius had finished his snack. He placed the skewer on the low table behind them and nodded. "About seven years ago, I lost my family. My wife and I had been very happy together, and even more joyful in becoming parents. When that was ripped away from me, I feared I would never recover."

"Oh, Kae, I'm so terribly sorry." Char put a hand on his shoulder, thoughtlessly choosing the bare one.

Instead of moving to a more chaste position, he let his touch linger and gave his husband a reassuring, massaging squeeze. Since Kaecilius seemed comforted, Char knew he had not offended.

"How could you know of my loss?" Kaecilius brought his own hand up and rested it on Char's. "I never told you."

The warm contact of Char's hand pressed against Kaecilius' naked skin, and Kaecilius holding him there, felt erotic. Char bit his lip, incapable of doing much else, other than staring and remaining wherever his husband preferred.

"I never gave you much of a chance," he finally ventured, slightly dazed. "I'm sorry for making fast judgments about you. It's only tonight that I feel I really know you. And you aren't the man I assumed you were when we first met."

Kaecilius laughed softly. He squeezed Char's hand once and then dropped his own. Char took his hand back as well, yearning for more touches. The ache between them seemed to deepen with each emotional reveal and confidence shared.

"I *did* show up uninvited in your realm and begin building a temple – with a design scheme that was…an acquired taste…"

They both laughed. "I haven't acquired a taste for it yet, but I'm glad my mind has been changed about you."

“And your heart?” Kaecilius inquired, his voice suddenly low and husky.

“My heart has been much the same since our first argument. I doubt that will change, even as my opinion of you improves.”

Char wished he could go further and tell his husband, *I was deeply attracted to you right away, and even more when we bickered. I knew I wanted you, the whole time, it’s just taken me this long to admit it to myself.*/p>

Kaecilius’ brow knitted. Again, he nodded respectfully. After a few moments’ thought, he turned back to Char with a more playful look.

“Have you ever had s'mores?”

“What? S’mores? No, it sounds ridiculous, what is it?” Char chuckled, grateful for the subject change.

“You’ll enjoy it. I’ll make it for you sometime. You like chocolate?”

Kaecilius leaned forward and gently cupped Char’s cheek. He used his thumb to brush a stray drop of wine from Char’s lower lip. Their eyes met, and Char wanted his husband to let him suck the finger. In his own desperately naive way, he had his instincts. Did Kaecilius want it, too?

“Yes, I really, *really* love chocolate,” he managed to say.

The King’s head and heart seemed to throb in unison as Kaecilius remained there with soft eyes for several beats, then drew away with a cryptic half- smile. “Excellent.”

“Then I shall look forward to…the s’mores.” Char forced a smile of his own, wishing his skin would stop tingling and sweating.

“You’re still wearing your daytime clothes. Were you hard at work, right until you came to my rooms?”

Char glanced down, remembering that he’d had the shirt and trousers on for many hours.

“That’s typical, I suppose, as a King. I still have much to learn, regarding how to run a realm and ensure the welfare of my subjects.”

“From one over-worker to another, Majesty, what about your own welfare? Perhaps if you had a source of…intimacy, to help you unwind after a long, busy day…”

“I’ve long since neglected my personal welfare, aside from remaining healthy for the sake of my people.” Char’s palms seemed even sweatier, and his eyes too wide with longing. “As for intimacy, I have never…that is…Ella and I kissed a few times, but that is the extent of my… uhhh…”

“Truly? A handsome King such as yourself might have any lover in the land.” Kaecilius’ face seemed to betray an odd mixture of relief and concern.

“But I haven’t wanted.” Until now. “Perhaps I’m too picky, or I’m afraid to be close to someone in that way. So close. Do you know what I mean?”

“All too well. I hope you will discover ways to live life to the fullest. Perhaps take a lesson from my autocratic misadventures. Here I am, and my only friend is my husband – who only married me to secure the safety of his kingdom after I endangered it. Ha, I’m lucky you even speak to me.”

Char considered this, and absent-mindedly untucked his shirt from his trousers; all of his clothing felt too hot and stuck to his skin with anxious perspiration. Sitting by the fire may have been the wrong choice, but it was cozy. He chewed the pad of his thumb, and then replied slowly.

“I love speaking with you. It is surely better to have one true friend than legions of artificial sycophants. And I promise to be a true friend to you, Kae. You can depend on me.”

Kaecilius turned away, brushing something from his cheeks before clearing his throat. As he faced his husband again, his eyes were reddened, his cheeks flushed.

“I promise you the same, your high-”

“Enough of that.” Char knelt and placed his hand over Kaecilius’ plush, tempting lips, almost fainting at how good they felt, soft and pressed to his skin. “Can you not call me Char?”

Kaecilius made a great, amusing show of trying to reply with his words smothered against Char’s palm. It felt so much like a kiss that Char’s cock twitched in sudden pleasure at the sensation. He swallowed back a moan, replacing it awkwardly with laughter.

Once he was free to speak, the older man answered, “I prefer Charmont. If you don’t mind. It’s a lovely name and it suits you.”

“Alright, then. I like you calling me that. Hardly anyone calls me ‘Charmont.’” Char sat and wrapped both arms around his knees, mostly to keep his trembling body steady. “Just my royal titles, or if they are closer to me, ‘Char.’”

A name that only you call me…that is so incomparably sweet and special. Oh, what am I to do with these feelings? What does it all mean?

Another pause followed, a type of silence they were quickly perfecting. It might be called uncomfortably nice, or hotly nervous. Char seriously thought about simply stating his feelings from the heart. Putting an end to this tortured indecision and uncertainty would surely be for the best!

“Charmont,” Kaecilius said sensitively, cutting off Char’s intention before it could solidify. “I never saw our union as a personally binding one, nor a long-standing arrangement. Obviously, once I am positive that there will be no further attacks by any rebels from the Dark Dimension, I can move on. Let you get back to your life…which is only just beginning, in so many ways.”

He swallowed hard and then continued: “Consider yourself free to do as you like with your private time, if there had been any question of it. Perhaps there had not been any question, but…”

“And you?” Char asked, as the conflict in his heart made his voice sound weak. “Would you prefer to be free to…see others…during our ‘temporary’ marriage?”

“It does not matter where I am concerned.” Kaecilius pursed his lips, then took out his loose ponytail. Without even needing to look, he swiftly, smoothly tucked and pulled his silver hair into the usual tight, strict and undeniably pretty style.

“Oh?” Char did not trust himself to look at his husband just then.

“There is no one I desire who desires me. I therefore seek to devote my free time to studying. The path of a sorcerer supreme is an everlasting journey through discovery. If three of my own soldiers can rise up against me unsuspected, I must hone my intuition, my powers of perception. I am also perfecting new spells, in case there should be a fight. Enhancing my powers of spatial manipulation and shockwaves. While it is likely that the rebellion was quelled with the exile of those three outliers, I intend to remain here, making myself an ever more capable defender, until I determine that I am no longer needed.”

The soothing, deep and rumbling timbre of Kaecilius’ voice had its own almost spell-like influence over Char. Although the context of the stiffly spoken, repressed speech was contrary to Char’s wish for greater honesty, his husband’s rich accent and throaty tone still made him feel pleasantly faint. So he smiled and tugged Kaecilius’ sleeve.

“Come now, you needn’t be so serious all the time. Relax, Kae, for me?”

“I can only try, Charmont.” The sorcerer’s hand rested on the rug, very close to Char’s own.

The space between them seemed to vibrate with tense attraction.

“Do. And as for all this…staying in Lamia for the foreseeable future, transforming yourself into an even more amazingly, exquisitely incomparable and intimidatingly perfect Dark Sorcerer Supreme….”

“I suppose I deserve that,” Kaecilius admitted with a short laugh, though he blushed.

“Yes, you do!” Char grinned. “But I gather that your realm is far more advanced than Lamia, in the area of technology. We still cook over an open flame and ride horses everywhere…I overheard you telling one of the palace guards about a device from your world which shows play-acted stories on a screen. As if the actors were right in the room with you! Won’t you miss those benefits of advanced civilization?”

Kaecilius scoffed amusedly. “Certainly not. When I set out in an ill-fated attempt to bring my family back, I began by traveling to the most remote and secretive location on Earth. Once I reached Kamar-Taj, I remained in solitary training, in a state of ongoing deprivation of any material pleasures, subsisting on the simplest of food. I was fine. If you ask me, technology has made my world antiquated compared to yours, not the reverse.”

“Hmm. Interesting.” Without really thinking about it, Char stretched out comfortably on the rug, resting chin in his hand. “So you wouldn’t mind staying here, if you didn’t have so many other projects in motion all the time?”

Kaecilius gazed down at him fondly. “Perhaps my ambition has outstripped my wisdom in taking on so much at once. Slowing down has finally made me question what I was in such a hurry about. I can’t possibly protect every single planet and reality at once. I even worry that I may not have fully let go of my controlling, potentially despotic nature. My need for the safety of absolute power could endanger far more souls than merely my own if not kept in check…”

This philosophical and insightful explanation was helpful to Kaecilius, who was still learning to understand his own wants, needs, temptations, flaws and strengths, not as a sorcerer, but as a man. However, it was not particularly illuminating for his husband.

Charmont had drifted off to sleep listening to Kaecilius intently, and now lay curled up on the rug rather like a sweet, lovely little puppy. Kaecilius wished he could keep this puppy forever, but he settled for placing a blanket over his spouse, then watching over him until he, too, slipped into slumber.

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The next morning, Char rose with a resounding yawn, stretching in confusion at his strange surroundings. Instead of his own royal bed, he was in his husband’s, tucked snugly under a warm blanket. Slowly, he remembered falling asleep on the rug, lulled by the sound of Kaecilius’ voice. The calming effect of his husband’s deep tones must have overpowered the exhausted King’s attempt to remain awake.

He was still dressed in his shirt and trousers from the day before, but Kaecilius had clearly carried him to bed at some point. Perhaps only an hour or two ago…a glance out the window at the sun told Char it was late in the morning.

Vaguely, he also seemed to recall his own voice cooing, a couple of hours ago…“stay with me, Kae, come to bed. Hold me.”

This was rather mortifying, but then he had a flashback of big, strong arms holding him and warm breath on his neck. Kaecilius, curled up behind him as they nestled down in the covers – as naturally as real husbands ever could.

“Has he run off? Did I frighten him away with my…demands for cuddles?” Char murmured, wincing.

Then he found a note on the pillow beside him and snatched it up instantly.

“*My Dear Charmont,*
Thank you for the gracious and delightful honor of your company last night. I appreciate your understanding, support, and kindness. You also make a delectable grilled cheese, the best I’ve ever had. Everyone should try it kebob style.”

Char giggled and raked a quivering hand through his hair. His teeth worried his chapped lower lip as he read on.

"*When I woke this morning, I had a sudden inspiration, a desire to create something special for you that will hopefully convey my deep regard. Please come to the place where we met. I should be ready by this afternoon, around lunchtime. I shall have a picnic prepared along with my gift.*

Yours,
Kae"

Char could hardly have been more wonderstruck and aroused if Kaecilius had shown up and kissed him right then. Alright, perhaps that would be more shocking and exciting, but the letter seemed a close second. The butterflies in Char's stomach came alive with vast, swooping announcements.

Apparently, they agreed with the pounding of his heart and the hot blood rushing to his morning erection, hardening it further. The consensus was that Char must go to his husband today, as he had slept on it and knew that he was ready to tell Kaecilius what he wanted. For them to become true spouses and share their lives together from this day forward.

*Thank goodness it is one of my lighter days as to royal duties. No need to delay – I can certainly make it to the clearing by noon…**our** place.*

Char hurried to his own chambers and bathed, then put on one of his handsomest outfits, an open-necked white shirt under a gold waistcoat, with smooth black trousers and his riding boots. He spoke a few quick words to the castle staff to let them know he would be out for several hours.

Hours, is it? How ambitious of me.

Perhaps it was, but there was only one way to find out! Once he had pacified the staff and guards regarding his safety going out alone, he took the same obscure trail back to the Enchanted Forest.

"I think that's it, Moonie," he murmured to his beloved white horse, guiding her down the path which he remembered traveling the first time he found Kaecilius.

How different the circumstances were today! How changed Char was, in his heart.

"I know it was here," he added in bafflement, hopping down from Moonbeam and surveying the place where he had stopped.

"But it doesn't look the same. Where is the enormous, ugly tower?"

He decided to investigate, telling Moonbeam to stay in the area. She was wise and loyal enough that he never tied her to any place, which was much his preference in the matter.

Char turned the familiar corner, past a row of tall trees with tittering squirrels and chipmunks scampering about. Reaching the entrance of the clearing itself, he discovered his husband,

standing at its center. Kaecilius' face lit up at the sight of Char, who gasped as he surveyed their surroundings.

Where the debatably "noble" temple once stood, now there was the most beautiful and yet humble country cottage imaginable. It had a thatched roof, bright purple shutters and a gorgeous garden of flowers, fresh fruits, and vegetables. Everything was real and vibrant, down to the sweet and savory scents which reached Char as he stared and stared. The swaying flowers and healthy stalks of herbs lined a front yard with a stone walk that led down a small hill. There, a perfect little white fence opened to the meadow which occupied the clearing outside.

The fresh and tranquil, warm and sunny day seemed like most days in Lamia, right down to the sparkling flow of the river running behind the house, providing an idyllic backdrop for their picnic.

Kaecilius waited with what seemed like restless attempts at patience as Char took in the details of the big surprise gift. He'd spread out a large blanket and brought a basket. Now, he waited at the site like a child on his birthday; except that his excitement was all for Charmont, to see his husband receive the gift and hopefully to make Char happy.

"Oh, Kae!" Char cried in amazement, "This is unbelievable. It's so *beautiful*…it's really divine. I don't understand how you could have done all this in one morning."

"Please, don't feed my God complex," Kaecilius warned humorously. "It's only a basic matter of rearranging environments and speeding the growth of plant life. I'm sure many fairies of Lamia could do the same, though using a different magical energy."

The King crossed the meadow quickly, finding his husband in the soft grass, awaiting him with a shy smile. Char threw his arms around Kaecilius and hugged him tightly. "I adore it."

"It seemed a more worthwhile use of the temple grounds," the sorcerer said near Char's ear.

As they drew back, he elaborated, "I thought this might be a respite for you…a little getaway from the stresses and duties of royal life. You can come here whenever you like, to enjoy nature and relax in the cottage…have a swim, or even a picnic with your husband."

"You created all of this, just for me." Char gazed at the stunning house and garden, then back at Kaecilius. "But Kae, marvelous as this place is, the most special part about it is right here, in my arms. I couldn't wait to see you today."

"I couldn't either, I've been anticipating you so nervously, but now you're here…I'm elated to see you…to hold you." Kaecilius looked away briefly, letting Char absorb his words before daring to continue.

The first answer he got was a warm brush of Char's lips against his cheek, which made the sorcerer's breath catch. He looked at the King, who was smiling brilliantly.

"I'm so, so glad we both feel the same," Char whispered ardently.

“How could anyone look at you and not feel this way?” Kaecilius asked, cradling his husband’s face in his hands. “How could anyone spend a night talking with you and not long for more time in your sweet presence?”

“Anyone would think you’ve had a change of heart, husband.” With pink cheeks and a besotted smile, Char leaned up a little, inviting Kaecilius’ lips to meet his own.

Kaecilius’s breath staggered again, as if Char overwhelmed him with this reciprocation, as if he felt unworthy. Char would show him otherwise, hundreds of times over, if necessary.

“Charmont,” the older man sighed, leaning down and angling his face, slowly moving in for a kiss, making sure it was what his husband really wanted as well. “My heart has never changed since the first time our eyes met.”

Their lips were close to meeting when a loud blast of magical energy jolted them out of the tender moment.

A portal opened, and through it came a sorcerer in a red cape, with a silvered goatee and an obviously high opinion of himself.

“You must be joking.” Angrily, Kaecilius stepped away from his husband and walked over to the man who had intruded on their special moment.

His whispered growl turned to a bold, yet nonchalant tone as he addressed the stranger.

“Well, if it isn’t Mr. Doctor,” he said drily.

“Will you drop that bit already? God, it was *maybe* funny the first time.” The other sorcerer floated in the air, exiting the portal completely and then landing on the grass with smug irritation.

“It’s still funny,” Kaecilius countered. “Now that we’ve confirmed it, why don’t you get out of here before I make you?”

“Not exactly a warm welcome, my old frenemy.” Archly, the man (Mr. Doctor?) approached Kaecilius. “We need to talk. About the little rebellion that recently broke out among your followers, and about the security – or lack thereof – of the Dark Dimension under your rule.”

“We *don’t* need to talk. I handled the situation with those insurgents. I’ve traveled briefly back to the Dark Dimension to confer with my soldiers and subjects. There have been no further issues with rebels, not even faint whispers of dissent. Don’t you have your own worries to tend to, in your world, Strange?”

“It is a worry to my world and every world, if you don’t have a handle on your people, Kaecilius. If another rebellion rises up, you can bet they’ll be a hell of a lot more surly. You can’t just toss them all into a random void.”

“I’m fairly certain I can do exactly that.” Kaecilius crossed his arms, unmoved by the other man’s argument.

Char came up beside his husband and asked, “Pardon me, Mr. Doctor…”

The man in the red cape glanced at Char, and then gave Kaecilius an accusing look. “You see? You see what you’ve done? Now even strangers are calling me…*ugh*…." He groaned. "Hello, there, Prince Charming, what can I do for you?”

“It’s *Charmont.*” Char crossed his arms, mirroring Kaecilius’ posture instinctively. He supposed they looked very married, and this comforted him.

“What?” The stranger asked, perplexed.

“You mispronounced my name, and got my rank wrong, for that matter,” Char explained with typically calm insistence. “It’s King Charmont, not Prince Charming.”

“You know what? Okay. Sure. What can I do for you, your majesty?”

“You can explain who you are, and why you seem to think you can order my husband around like a servant.” Char raised his eyebrows.

“Your *husband?*” The stranger’s jaw dropped as he pointed back and forth between Kaecilius and Char. “Really? I mean…*him*, really?”

“Really,” Char confirmed, glaring. “We are married. Now as King of Lamia, I order you to answer my questions.”

“I’m Doctor Stephen Strange. I am a sorcerer from a planet called Earth, which is where your esteemed spouse is from, too. I don’t know how much he’s told you about his past actions.”

Char held Kaecilius off when his husband attempted to intervene. The dark sorcerer looked down at Char’s hand, with its shining wedding ring, placed in front of him in a spousal, silent “*shut up, I’ll handle this*” gesture. He smiled.

“Everything. He’s told me everything, Dr. Strange. I can only assume from your haughty attitude that your own past is entirely pure, with no mistakes, no selfish decisions to regret or improve on?”

Kaecilius stifled a laugh in his hand; Strange frowned.

“I *heard* that, Kaecilius. No, King Charmont, my past is about as impure as they come, and that’s why I know the danger of immersing oneself in Dormammu’s brand of magic. Any master of the mystic arts knows that it cannot be wielded by a human without some form of destruction following. He’s managed decently until now, but what happens when his soldiers turn against him again and steal that power? I barely trust you to manage it, I sure as shit don’t trust your little band of spaced out hippies to be responsible with it. It could mean the end of everything!”

“How dramatic,” Char reflected. “But my husband has put down the small rebellion and no other has emerged, as he just explained. What proof do you have to offer that a second revolution is in the works?”

Strange paused, and Kaecilius laughed sardonically. “He has no proof, only paranoia and poor judgement. Strange, you may think of yourself as the only man who can change and better himself after a string of horrible mistakes. But that isn’t true. I’ve left you and Wong alone and in peace to take care of your own realm. Why can’t you offer me the same decency?”

“*I* never tried to take over an entire planet by feeding them to a voracious evil entity.”

Kaecilius rolled his eyes and huffed an indignant sigh, as if he was addressing a kindergartener. “That was not the point. How like you to be pitifully reductive, Strange.”

Strange groaned. “Look, Kaecilius, it isn’t working out. We need to find someone else more responsible and trustworthy who can handle the Dark Dimension and Dormammu’s magic without–”

“*My* magic. That’s the second time you credited it to the late Dormammu. After I killed the depraved creature, I siphoned his power to my own inner arsenal. You can’t take it, no one can, and no one ever will.”

“I’m sorry to be contentious, and genuinely, congrats on the wedding,” he nodded to Char, who waved it off. “But you can’t keep this power. We need to find a safe vessel for it, pronto.”

“Would you like to try and take it from me, Strange? It doesn’t usually go well for you when we do battle.” Kaecilius smirked, “As I recall, you’ve lost every time you faced me, save for the time you tricked me in a dishonorable fashion, sending me to the very same dimension of which you now try to rob me.”

“Are you going to talk some sense into him?” Strange stared at Char, who wore an unbothered expression.

“Why should I? He’s speaking perfect sense from where I stand.”

Kaecilius rolled his shoulders back, facing his old enemy with increased confidence. “My husband stands with me. Let that be understood. Now, show me what you’re made of. Have you improved since we last fought, or are you going to bore me again?”

“If we must,” Strange replied wryly, “Fine, fine.”

“Charmont, hide yourself, take shelter,” Kaecilius said, in a very different tone than that he addressed Strange with.

Then he fired a blast of energy at Kaecilius, who neatly dodged it and even diverted it before it could knock down the cottage's roof. He sent it back to Strange, who rolled his eyes and evaded it.

“I’m not here to play catch,” Strange warned. “Why don’t you stop wasting time and admit when you’re wrong?”

“As soon as I’m wrong, I will get right on that.” Grimly smiling, as Char stood off to one side by a sheltering tree, Kaecilius attacked again, and then the two powerful sorcerers began a more aggressive assault, nearly evenly matched.

Char could see that his husband had a slight edge in experience and speed, which made his heart warm with pride. It also soothed his worries for Kaecilius’ safety. Although the tree would have blocked him and kept Char entirely safe, he could not take his eyes from the man he loved, in such perilous combat. As such, he left himself in a vulnerable position without even considering the risks.

As the battle heightened, the sorcerers began flying at each other with various tricks and attacks that Char could barely follow. The men fought so quickly, drawing on power that flowed through them like their own life blood, and it astonished Char to see it play out at such length.

He kept staring, although he knew there was nothing he could do to help aside from that – what chance would he have against Strange? The longing to do anything at all to help his husband kept him on edge, even more than the simple fact of Kaecilius’ dangerous situation.

Lost in these thoughts and anxieties, Char was caught unaware when Strange deflected one of Kaecilius’ blasts and it accidentally zoomed right at the young King.

Before he knew what happened, Char found himself flying backwards through the air as pain seared through his whole being. He felt a rough, excruciating landing on the hard ground, some distance from the clearing, and then he blacked out.

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“This is all *your* fault,” Strange seethed as they hurried to Char’s location.

“Strange, shut your mouth before I plunge a sword through your heart. If that boy does not recover, trust me, I’ll do it anyway. No magic required.”

“Jesus.” Strange kept walking, but moved slightly away from his companion. “Fine.”

Kaecilius broke into a run when he saw Char sprawled unconscious in the riverbank dirt. He went down on his knees and gathered his husband up tenderly. “Please, Charmont, you must wake. Wake up, my love…”

Strange hovered nearby, not unsympathetically. “Damn my soft and mushy old heart,” he muttered, watching the once-evil sorcerer cradling the King’s body with obvious love.

“You realize that you can’t heal him using your own energy,” Strange noted.

Kaecilius growled and glared at him, as if he would still use that sword of his if he was further provoked.

“I know. You must heal him, with opposite energy. So do it, Strange, now. This boy has done nothing to you and has never hurt anyone. He has a heart of gold and his people need him.”

“I’ll do it,” Strange allowed, “But you have to agree to go back to the Dark Dimension and stay there this time. Take care of your business. Shut the door behind you; I know you know what that means.”

“You’re bartering with me for this innocent young King’s life?” Kaecilius laughed harshly through tears that spilled down his cheeks.

“I’m sorry, Kaecilius, but you haven’t left me any other choice. Your departure leaves the Dark Dimension wide open for someone else, someone greedier and less stable, to take the crown. You have no way of knowing it isn’t going down right now. What I’m trying to do is be fair by giving you another chance to successfully rule your domain.”

“I am always in touch with the energy of the Dark Dimension,” Kaecilius argued, his voice gritty with emotion as he stroked Char’s curls gently. “I know when there is something wrong and I handle it like any other capable commander of their territory.”

“I can’t trust you implicitly. Rather, I can’t hinge the lives of untold thousands on the off chance that maybe you’re sincere and maybe you do know what you’re doing. Not after what happened last time, on Earth. Everyone in the world would have disintegrated into a life of endless torment, had you succeeded. If you’re to keep the power, you keep it at home and stop planet-hopping.”

“I don’t have the time or energy to argue with you. That was the past, and I am much-changed. Perhaps the best way to show you is what I must do anyway: I accept your offer.”

“You will go back to the Dark Dimension and remain there, as I said?” Strange hesitated with two fingers held up in the configuration to summon a portal.

“Yes.” Kaecilius looked at his husband one last time, then kissed his forehead before gently sliding out from under him, moving him to the soft grass, closer to Strange. “And you will bring him back. Tell him I’m sorry and that I love him. He deserves to know that much, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, I do. Listen, I’m sorry it had to go down this way, but–”

“Stop your infernal blathering, Strange,” Kaecilius glowered, then closed his eyes, preparing for the journey to a “home” that now felt like the furthest thing from it. “Let it be done.”

Chapter End Notes

Next time: In the conclusion, Kaecilius confronts his destiny in the Dark Dimension, but finds that it’s not the one he expected at all…

PS: Sorry about the interrupted kiss, but don't worry -- there's kissing and smut galore in Chapter 3! 🥰✨

Thanks for reading! 👑🪄💗

Happiest ever after

When Char thought back to the early days of knowing his husband, regret and anger nearly made him burst into tears each time.

And he had no time for tears. He strode through a deeper part of the woods, more naturally rich with magic that hummed among dancing tree branches in a sparkling breeze, his jaw set in determination. Why had it taken so long to appreciate and care for Kaecilius? They could have had more days, more nights to explore a love which now might be lost to the winds of time.

This sort of thinking gets one nowhere on a mission! Char scowled at his own overwhelmed mood, refusing to get snagged on the brambles of vulnerability and self-blame at such a time. Thankfully, his solitary journey was at an end, the fairy godmothers' village in sight.

His mental self-upbraiding was vanquished abruptly with a sensation of pure wonderment. From quietly mystical, the woods had become a burst of color, light, music and deliriously cheerful magic.

Fairies could, of course, live in any type of abode they pleased. So while the enchanted hollow was occupied by plenty of the ever-popular cozy cottage sort of place, there was a fair assortment of more lavish houses, too. Char scanned the environs carefully; where usually he would have been charmed and intrigued simply to watch as more seasoned fairies trained novices – practicing to see what happened when the newbies attempted to make their wishes come true with amusingly varied results – now he was a man with only one urgent matter in mind.

Char saw a particularly glitter-strewn, tall lilac and blush-pink tower and just had a feeling he knew to whom it belonged. Perhaps it was the way the tower – while stunningly lovely and impressive – tilted ever so slightly to one side. That was Lucinda all over.

He made his way down the winding path with relative ease as colorful swirls of enchanted energy zinged through the twilight sky, painting darkening purple and sleepily rowsing stars with exuberant magenta, lemon yellow and bright cerulean.

One time, Kaecilius had called Char's eyes that. "Cerulean." And the man had insisted that no other glimpse of a color remotely adjacent in the spectrum had ever compared with the version which sparkled in his young husband's curious gaze.

Char's stomach swooped and his heart galloped, beating so hard it hurt. Kae. What he wouldn't do to have those intent, studious amber eyes on him again, softly questioning although beneath their careful examination lay fiery passion. He wanted to get burned. To let Kae's passion consume him eternally, and to enjoy their little domestic pastimes, the simple profundity of trust, the surprisingly arousing jolt of having the same sense of humor.

Sighing, he couldn't help feeling out of his depths when it came to confronting the Dark Dimension. He was a King of Lamia, and although he'd slapped Kae with a rolled up copy of

Medieval Teen Vogue when his husband quipped that Lamia was the kingdom-equivalent version of Disneyland. Well…

Once Char had forced Kae to tell him what Disneyland was by trying to tickle the sorcerer's soft belly (the ultimate threat), his husband dissolved into laughter and admitted to the full explanation. And Kae might have been kidding, but he hadn't been wrong.

If Lamia was the ultimate "Magic Kingdom" with its comparatively fixable problems, quirky royal subjects and swoony ballroom delights, well then, that made it the complete opposite of the Dark Dimension. Silly, to fear any realm where his husband ruled supreme, but perhaps Char wrestled with the anxiety of not knowing exactly what had happened since their parting. That is, since Kae had been ripped away from Char and left him metaphorically bleeding.

His fear changed in a blink, anger fueling his resolve. He couldn't decide who deserved a good slap more, Dr. Strange for not leaving well enough alone and using Kae's vulnerability to manipulate him back to the Dark Dimension? Or Kae for actually taking the deal? Surely there had to be some other way to revive Char! In his heart, despite having only scant details of what had occurred (these mostly assembled from his jumbled memory of listening to Strange and Kae talking while he was semiconscious), Char knew that Kae had jumped on the deal because it was the fastest, most effective and safe method to bring Char to good health again.

When I see his smug, secretly self-loathing, insecure and gorgeous face again, I'm going to give him a slap he won't forget anytime soon, Char fumed. I'll show him a Dark Dimension he'll never forget!

It was one of the most "married" thoughts the King had ever experienced, and therefore a slight, timid touch of amusement slightly relaxed him.

He'd love to issue Strange the "Sorcerer Supreme" (more like "Sorcerer Know-it-All of the Land of Holier-than-Thou Prats," if you asked Char!) a good blow across his smug face as well. But the way he'd strike that meddling buffoon was nothing like the loving wrath with which he'd teach Kaecilius a lesson.

All this while, which probably added up to just five minutes or so, Char had been knocking or calling up to Lucinda intermittently, somewhat tossed back and forth on the stormy seas of his own inner conflicts and emotional confusions. His patience had officially run its brief course as he began to fear that Lucinda was not at home. Ella's fairy godmother was notorious for a few reasons, but she was also the most powerful among her kind. Trouble was, one of those notorious hobbies happened to be "unannounced, extended vacations to sate eccentric wanderlust."

If Lucinda was off jaunting about on some exotic shopping escapade or carrying on a torrid affair with the devastatingly handsome Count who ruled a distant land, Char was going to lose it. It being the tiny fragments of his remaining sanity.

No matter. Wherever she is, I shall find her.

But it turned out to be easier than expected, as Char abruptly jumped back when the gold and purple-jeweled door to Lucinda's tower opened, revealing the fairy herself.

Lucinda rested one hand on the doorframe, tapping her long, silvery nails and raising her dark brows. She wore a two-piece outfit in her trademark shades of purple and pink, the shimmering top and short skirt becoming as always. Her beautiful face contained kindness, yes, but she could be unreasonable and short-tempered, a handful, in short. At the moment, Lucinda looked as if she thought this a great moment for putting on a little show.

Languorously posing like a model, she batted her long lashes with pretty brown puppy-dog eyes teasing. Oh, Good Heavens, he was hardly there to *flirt!*

"What brings you by my door, your Royal Highness?" Lucinda asked softly. "How may I… … … serve you?"

"By…switching your mood, if you please, madam." Char cleared his throat, stiffly moving back as she sidled towards him seductively. "I've come to ask you a very particular favor, but if that does not, ahem work for you…"

"Yessss?"

She smirked expectantly and got close again, fiddling with Char's shirt collar.

"Then it shall become a royal command!" he asserted. "Come now, Lucinda, we haven't time. As Ella's fairy godmother, I'm hoping against hope you'd do me a service for her sake. It's an emergency."

She rolled her eyes, unoffended by the rejection, but bored and annoyed in general. "Fine, let's have it, then, Charmont of Lamia." Putting her hands on her hips, she huffed, "What is it you so boldly require?"

"I must rescue my husband – aah, that is, my royal consort, Kaecilius – from the Dark Dimension!"

"You're *married?*" Lucinda gawked at him as if he was a page from the National Lamian Enquirer come to baffling life. "Since when? Ella's said nothing about it."

"When was the last time you read your mail?" Char smiled, trying to be reasonable. "Think about it, Lucinda. Where have you been, that you've not heard of a royal marriage?"

She flounced about the moonlit path of pearls and seaglass which constituted her front walk and shot him an almost stern look.

"None of your business. Although it is true that I *may* have been relatively inattentive to the national news of late. It is possible I was otherwise engaged until approximately twelve hours ago when I came home in the mood for rebound s–"

"Oh? And where precisely were you otherwise engaged?"

"Are you familiar with the Vreqeadian Pleasure Resort?" She studied her nails with a sigh.

“Not personally. I trust you had an enjoyable rest there?” He conveniently did not mention that she was nearly always on one vacation or another and one was not entirely certain from what she required a “rest.”

“I don’t know if that’s the word I would use. His name is Anastiaraus and he is a Tree Person. Known, of course, to possess the most exquisite beauty among the countless realms.”

“I’m sorry, what was his name again?” Char tried to be polite and somewhat pay attention to her bragging, if only to try and get the conversation back to his own purposes.

“Astantius,” She sighed. “The unfaithful boar of a splinter that he ended up being!”

“I could actually have sworn you originally said Anastiaraus,” Char noted, his brow furrowed.

“Oh, really? Well, then, why are you making me repeat it, do you think I’ve nothing better to do? I’m trying to wallow in post-break-up angst and your interruption is not turning out to be as fortuitous as I originally assumed.”

“I’m so sorry that the Tree Person turned out to be unfaithful, Lucinda.”

“Save it. Why don’t you go leap into the Dark Dimension and get your husband, then? Some people in relationships never shut up about it. *We get it,* you’re in love, you wear his ring, you’re sooo happy. Some of us aren’t so lucky, you know!” She narrowed her eyes.

“Oh, yes, I agree with you one hundred percent. I’ll go right to the Dark Dimension, handle my own affairs and leave you to find your own rebound…distractions in peace.” Char smiled at her, keeping steady eye contact as her scatterbrained mood sent her overactive mind and sharp wit zooming all over the place, somewhere landing on their conversation from a few seconds ago.

“Good! Go, then. Why are you talking to *me* about it?”

“I just need you to send me there,” he reminded her kindly.

“Fine, fine, anything to get you to shut up about your perfect husband and your perfectly romantic life. How completely obnoxious. *Some of us* are single! Some of us can’t even get a man who is literally *rooted into the earth* to commit!--”

She was probably still rambling over her grievances, but Char could no longer hear her, as with a simple flick of her bangled wrist, Lucinda had shot him right to the Dark Dimension, with stomach-churning speed.

Char landed on hands and knees on the ceiling-floor, where the ground and the sky were both and neither. Everything seemed to be of slick onyx with iridescent rainbows flickering in a disturbingly chaotic pattern. Trying to walk only left Char knee deep in a quicksand like substance, and he let out a cry of alarm, worried he’d drown before getting more than a few inches in Kae’s unknown direction.

“Hell’s bells, child.” Suddenly, a strong, rather feathery, hand-like appendage wrapped around Char’s hand, tugging him free of the bizarre lake with its viscous and distinctly unpromising downward pull. “Come on, then.”

Char found himself on the other side of the slowly spiraling death-lake and shivered in fear and shock at what had almost occurred. “I owe you a tremendous debt of gratitude, sir or madame, uhhh…mmm?”

“No, but my second cousin twice removed was called Uhhhmmm.” The creature, hulking and muscular, with the head and torso of an eagle and the lower body of a horse, chuckled and shook its head.

“Really?”

“Not really, I’m kidding, silly. Who are you, and what in the name of Dormammu’s dead ass are you doing in the back of beyond nowhere?”

The creature spoke in a deep voice with a smooth and strange accent, but then again, what *was* strange, really? Char may have underestimated all the potential permutations contained in the word. Or this was probably…beyond simply being bizarre.

Still, he must remain in control of his senses and firm up his resolve once more. No matter that he had black drops of substance sticking to his attire and half-worried there was living matter in it; no matter that he was being eyed in something like dry mockery by a bird-horse-man who had saved his life. It had to be just another day, or he’d lose his ability to remain useful to Kae.

“I have come here to see my husband,” Char announced. His voice was wan, so he cleared his throat and went on with all of the boldness he could summon: “My name is King Charmont, of Lamia. Kaecilius, Dark Sorceror Supreme and Ruler of the Dark Dimension, is my spouse, and I insist on seeing him. *Now*.”

“My name is…I no longer quite recall. You’re lucky I’m disposed to be kindly, little King, as your attitude leaves much to be desired.”

“Forgive me, I’m– I’m incredibly stressed!” Char finally broke down, angrily swatting the black goo off his white shirt before it could wriggle around any further. “Disgusting! What *is* that, even? Don’t tell me! I’m usually the politest man you could meet, but understand that my husband sold his own soul to save me whilst I was in the grip of an obnoxious enchantment which literally *no one* asked for. I’ve been forced to realize that I’m deeply in love with a self-sacrificing idiot and that the only way to get him back in my arms is to come here, where my brain is surely being pulled apart like taffy as we speak! The only thing that makes less sense or is more maddening than the maelstrom of insanity-provoking sights which surround us, my feathery friend, is LOVE.”

“I mean, fair enough. How do my feathers look, incidentally? I wasn’t always part-bird. Still not sure I like having a beak.” The creature’s bland acceptance and casual question might have amused a less wildly desperate Char.

“It’s fine, it’s all fine, you’re quite a handsome bird-horse,” Char said, trying not to sound dismissive. “Dammit all!” He could no longer stand the creeping sensation of the black substance still clinging to his shirt, and flung it off. “Take it then!” he yelled down to the pool. “Bon appetit!”

“Bird-Horse. Hmm.” Char’s new acquaintance cupped his chin thoughtfully. “Think that name’s taken?”

“Does it matter?” Shirtless and shivering in the chilly, yet steamy-hot, overall eerie and unsettling place, Char reasoned, “Pretty rare to be the only one who has a name. I know a Liliana who is a giant barmaid and a fairy Liliana who is a ballroom dance instructor back home.”

“Hh, that’s true. Anyway, thanks for letting me bounce that off you.”

“No problem.”

Char’s glowering disapproval of the place and the cold, nauseating swirl it left in his stomach were making his manners rather threadbare.

“Dreadfully amusing, aren’t you, little King? No wonder you’re all Sire can talk of lately. Here you go, then, come – before I change my mind.”

Bird-Horse, “Or, ‘Horse-Bird,’ perhaps? What sounds better? I used to be Brad” went down on all fours and invited Char to ride him to a new destination. “Want to see his High Lowness or what? Don’t waste this rare emergence of my hopeless romantic side.”

“Very well, uh, thank you, then.” Char climbed atop the creature and took unsteady, loose hold of the feathers at his nape.

“Hold on tight, but don’t worry, it’s a short journey!”

This turned out to be no warning at all, as getting to Kae involved another three hundred or so upside-down, inside-out mini-dimension jumping blurs, at the end of which Char was left a trembling mess, on the verge of throwing up, laughing hysterically, weeping for years and screaming forever.

“That’s no way to look when your husband’s about to see you,” chided Char’s feathery friend. “Pull yourself together, child.”

“Whatever,” Char bleated, sounding like a sickly lamb. He slid from the bird-horse-man’s back to the floor-ceiling-neither, composed of deep purple and undulating black clouds, a landing that was soft and comforting, in a terrifying sort of way.

“And whatnever. I’ll summon the Lord of Bleakness and Dread to you now.”

“Excuse me, but this isn’t *actually* Wonderland, you know. ‘Whatnever’?”

“Look around,” the feathered beast shrugged. “Can’t you see that? There is whatnevery-everness slathered on the not-*walls* of this place!”

“I’m not looking around, I’ve learned my lesson. My brain doesn’t need tying in any more knots, thank you.” Char sat up in the weird clouds, concerned that if they felt comfortable, they were probably designed to hypnotize him or something like that.

He covered his eyes and grimaced. How was he going to find Kae? Even if he trusted… Brad…was there a specific location to find the ruler? A not-a-throne-room?

“Kay.” There was a brief silence and a soft crackle of electric-like magic, and then the sound of boots hitting not-and-yet-ground. “Oh, hey. This tiny human scoundrel seeks you, Sire.”

“This what?” The sound of Kaecilius’ familiar, beloved voice made Char feel faint. “Charmont?”

Within an instant, a soft thud announced his husband falling to his knees in front of him, and then strong arms wrapped around him, pulling Char into the exact kind of hug he needed: one of bone-deep tenderness and a panic that Char might disappear at any moment.

“Charmont,” Kaecilius repeated, drawing back and gently pulling the boy’s hands from his wide blue eyes. “Do you not trust your own beautiful eyes, sweetheart?”

“Husband?” Char panted, digging his fingers into Kaecilus’ buttery leather tunic. The earthy shades of dark orange and brown were so typical of his beloved, and the scent of Kae’s spicy, seductive cologne was the same – even if nothing else in this crazed realm could be understood. Char had just found his gravity. “Kae, it’s really you!”

Kaecilus actually blushed at the way Char gazed upon him, like he’d nearly died of thirst only to find an endless waterfall. “Of course it’s me. I feared never to see your lovely face again, Charmont. If only you knew…”

They were briefly interrupted by Brad-Bird-Horse inquiring for some honest feedback on potential names, and without looking at the fellow, Kaecilius ordered him to make his own decision. “And here, a reward for safeguarding my dear one back to me…”

“A reward? Oh, thank you, your high-low-ness, can it involve liqu–”

Brad vanished, swallowed up in a flourish of black and violet magic dust.

“I recently had a bar opened a few levels down,” Kaecilus confided casually. “It’s doing quite well. Not a surprise, considering how much most of us need a strong drink after spending time here.”

“I should certainly say so,” Char laughed, rubbing his forehead against Kaecilius’ broad shoulder as his husband firmly massaged his tensed shoulder muscles. “I can’t believe you actually returned to rule over the Dark Dimension. What were you thinking?”

“Actually,” Kaecilus smiled playfully, with seriously enamored eyes as he helped his husband to stand. “I’ve renamed the place. Dark Dimension was just so negative-sounding, do you not think? It is now called ‘Archipelago of Anguish and Redemption.’”

“Ohh, that’s much, much better,” Char snarked, softly tugging a strand of Kae’s silvery, long hair which had slipped free of his usual tight styling. “So catchy, on top of cheerful. Can you say that ten times fast?”

“Archipelago of –” Kae’s thoughtful expression changed to a surprised and amazed smile as Char grabbed his face and tenderly kissed each of his cheeks.

“Shut up,” Char entreated, “Look at me, I’m a walking disaster. I came all the way here to tell you to come back to me this instant. And if you ever leave me again, you’ll find me clinging to your ankles like an anchor. Is that understood?”

“Are you issuing me a formal, royal command to stay by your side forevermore, Majesty?” Kaecilius raised his pale brows, and Char noticed how the shifting prisms of mind-boggling new colors in this realm highlighted the regal, chiseled handsomeness of his husband’s face.

“I am. And you would not dare defy me, I am sure.”

“Of course I would never defy you, my darling little King. I live to serve you.”

“Yes, that is quite right, husband. Now you’re talking sense. Imagine, abandoning me to life without you, merely to save me from a potentially fatal spell. It’s infuriating!”

“Sorry?” Kae ran his fingers through Char’s curls. “I was not sure what my other options were at the time. And now, I…”

“You may not go off on some humble tangent, nor claim any sort of obligation to this dreadful pit full of…anguish and redemption, or whatever you said.”

“Charmont…” Kae pressed his lips softly to Char’s sweaty brow and sighed. “I would never have blamed you for letting me go, even forgetting me. I’d brought you nothing but trouble, though you taught me how to love again and made me finally understand the man I wish to be. I’ll go where you please, Highness. I’ll never, ever leave you. This place shall live on forevermore, under direct supervision from my trusted advisors. All rebellions have been quelled; and even Stephen Strange would have to admit I’ve done well. Unfortunately, if I ever see him again, he will be too busy being slammed between large trees to consider such matters.”

“I don’t care about this place, or Stephen Strange, or anything else. Only you, coming home with me right now and the two of us at the cabin you made me. We shall be taking an impromptu honeymoon of an indeterminate length. However long it takes you to show me how high your regard for me truly is. Does it sound like I could never forget you?”

“Come here.” Kae tipped Char’s face up towards his own, shivering as the younger man gasped, immediately leaning against him and parting his lips, giving them an inviting lick. “Charmont…my beautiful King…my husband…”

“Yours,” Char murmured against soft, warm lips that soon pressed to his in an aching, amorous first kiss. As they let the soft tease of that first contact linger and drive them insane,

the ground fell out from under their feet for a few seconds, swiftly replaced by hard, earthly ground and dewy grass.

Before he opened his fluttering lashes, Char already knew they were home, and that didn't mean the Palace. They were in the one place meant only for them to share, a safe haven. The beautiful, cozy cottage by the lake which Kaecilius had created as a present for Char, replacing the ugly, garish tower which had held dark power and served to symbolize the sorcerer's formidable ego.

"You made all of this for me. And in doing so, you put aside your own agenda and your jaded nature, your cultivated appearances of self-serving greed, all to…essentially make me smile." Char tilted his head to one side, his thumb slowly, curiously grazing Kaecilius' smooth jawline. "Why?"

"I was a fool when I first came here to this world…your world…" Kaecilius rested both hands on Char's waist. "So self-absorbed and arrogant. I would never be able to look at myself in the mirror again, except that if you care for me, I know there must be something… basically salvageable about me."

"Hmm. We shall see. I am dedicated to the act of salvaging. And it would be a shame to deprive you of seeing how good-looking you are…I may be willing to confess that your former ego was slightly arousing."

"You may be willing to confess?" Kaecilius chuckled, moving his hands up and down Char's sides. Every touch was reverent, worshipful. Testing the waters and showing that half-hidden flash of intensity. "Very well. I can still smolder with the best of them, with a bit of effort."

He gave Char a signature "smoldering" look, and the younger man groaned. "You know, that is annoyingly effective."

"How so?" Kaecilius had his face angled perfectly for a kiss, and Char's stomach flipped.

"Tell me why you made this place for me and I'll show you how so." Char whispered against his husband's warm lips.

"I stopped wanting to play games or show off to anyone else. I only wanted to make you happy, and I hoped you might invite me to spend an afternoon with you here, sometime. We could do as much or as little as you liked."

Kae watched Char bite his lip and growled low in his throat. "I'd make love to you for hours or I'd sit patiently with you, saying nothing or talking quietly. Perhaps you'd allow me to place a shawl around your shoulders and to kiss your hand. To offer a flower along with my heart. Whatever you please, my love, it is all for you. As I am."

"Did you really assume I wouldn't want you to come back?" Char whispered, leaning into Kae's caress on his cheek.

"I ruined so many things for you. I showed up uninvited, drawing danger to your peaceful realm. You felt obliged to marry me in order to protect the kingdom, and then I thought you'd

rather have anyone but me, so I felt I was imposing. After we became friends, I thought a true friend would leave you be, let you have the life you'd choose. Still, I could never leave you until Strange bullied me into it. Perhaps I was too amenable to the suggestion. Too quick to believe my unworthiness."

"Unworthiness?" Char gasped. "If you'd been paying attention, you must have seen me falling helplessly for you all along. Did you not suspect that my irritable remarks, my saucy teasing and my insistence of not being attracted to you were clear evidence of how I wanted you?"

"I scarcely dared hope, my King. You taught me humility, so perhaps you've only yourself to blame…no, you are right," he winced when Char gave him a fondly warning look. "It's my fault for not confessing my love."

"I happen to like confessions of love. And horse rides by the ocean…and long bubble baths…handsome men to share my secret grilled cheese recipe with. You need to get to know me better, husband."

"Then you must show me, as well." Kaecilius dipped his face slowly, closing the tiny distance between them.

This time, when he kissed Char's lips it was not remotely chaste or tentative. He still kissed slowly, but there was a powerful passion in it; he licked into Char's mouth with a heady moan and tightened his hold on the boy's silky curls.

Char felt dizzy; he clung to Kae as it was all he could do to contain himself. He had never been kissed like that, not the naive and innocent pecks he had shared with Ella, but the hard, wet and unrelenting kiss of a grown man who knew what he wanted, and how to take it. He quivered and wanted to be taken care of, wanted to be small, soft and open in Kae's protective embrace, shown the art of love in ways that would make him a moaning mess on tangled sheets.

"Will you take me inside, my love?" Char asked in a pleading voice, softer than petals. "I should probably bathe first. I'm not sure whether I smell more of anguish or redemption, though all I feel is…joyful anticipation."

"I'm sure a bath would do us both good, and I intend to take the utmost care of you." Kaecilius now wore his heart on his sleeve, and Char could clearly see that the older man was struggling to believe their bliss could be true, or that he had indeed earned redemption.

"I take it you did create an *inside* of the cottage." Char took his husband's hand and they walked side by side across the night-darkened emerald grass.

Inside, Char's jaw dropped as he discovered the gorgeous interior of the little house. There was a charming window seat in front, and a sitting room with large floor cushions rather than formal furniture. All of the decor was done in Char's favorite colors, the ones that brought him comfort: dove gray, royal blue and soft gold; Lamian colors. He could easily have curled up on the enormous cushions and drifted to sleep for days, but Char was far too excited about his reunion with Kaecilius to feel anywhere near as exhausted as he probably should.

“Is that a reproduction of the fireplace and rug from your bedchambers in the palace?” Char asked in wonderment, touching the familiar stone facade of the fireplace and the soft, downy white of the rug.

“I may have some sentimental feelings about that place. And specifically…”

“That night,” Char said, blushing. “I’ve not stopped thinking of it since. And often I’ve fantasized that instead of drifting to sleep by your side on the rug, I move closer and perhaps even into your lap. Put my arms around your neck and figure out the rest from there.”

“I would have taken you down then and there, if you were bold about it. And sometimes you can be rather bold, in your own rather mischievous way. As if you mean to court trouble on purpose. Believe me, boy, I can be accommodating.”

The way he spoke these words made it difficult to keep eye contact with him. Char trembled and laughed breathily, though they both knew it was a nervous sound and had little to do with amusement. “I had suspected as much, though you mustn't encourage my mischief…unless you wish to see the full extent of my dreadful misbehavior. The opportunity to run wild is so opposite to my life as King…well, don’t tempt me.”

“If you need to run wild, then so you shall, and if you need to be put back in your place afterwards, particularly if you should defy me, I shall be once again…your devoted servant.” Kaecilius’ dark eyes glittered with such cheerful sin that it was impossible to doubt the veracity of his smirk.

Kae led Char down the hall and showed him into a snug bathing chamber done up in sunshine yellow and gold. The tub was so large and fine, it barely fit into the small size of the room. Obviously, Kaecilius could have made the rooms as large as he pleased, but designed them to be cozily snug. The effect was undeniably comforting.

“And if I was shy…softly asking if you would like to kiss me?” Char’s eyes were big and brilliantly blue as Kaecilius’ whiskey-hued gaze took in his aroused, flushed complexion.

“I *would* have taken you down. Right there and then, if you were shy about it. I *do* know what you need.”

“And how to give it to me?” Char’s voice caught.

Kae began unfastening his own clothing, placing his leather tunic and pants aside, stripped down to black underwear that left his excitement on bold display. Char blushed more darkly and took off his shirt, his cock throbbing as they put on their striptease for each other. The moment felt so breath-takingly honest. Peeling off the few remnants of cloth and buckles, leather and cotton between them…leaving them face to face, hearts pounding.

Char could only bring himself to glance at Kaecilius, with that broad, muscular physique, toned, hair-covered chest and slender waist…that enormously rigid manhood, dripping just for him. A few glances were enough to make him bite his lip hard, and then he had an entire small argument with himself over where to put his hands.

In the meantime, Kaecilius stared at Char's nakedness, unabashed. "Never in my wildest dreams, Charmont," he murmured huskily.

"Nor I, Kae," said Char, lashes fluttering as his cock twitched with need, hard and heavy between his thighs. The ache was almost more than he could stand.

"Why don't you get in the tub first and get comfortable?"

Char took Kae's offered hand, grateful for the assist as he did not trust his lust-addled mind or shaking body not to slip and fall. Banging his head on the side of the tub before they even began consummating their desire was *not* what he had planned.

"It's such a *lovely* bath," Char sighed as the hot – but not *too* hot – water immediately began to relieve his "travel" aches – dimension jumping wasn't for the faint of heart. "Feels perfect, except for one thing…"

His outstretched arms were quite enough to summon Kaecilius to his side, leaning down to capture sweet lips in an enveloping, slowly passionate kiss. The older man savored every moment of tasting Char, murmuring his name and sighing. Char caressed his husband's face with soapy hands, leaving water to drip down elegant cheekbones.

"This is a wonderful scent you've concocted, darling," Char smiled. "You are getting quite astute with Lamian floral aromas."

"Vlerry, Eacianna, Grozhire…a blend of exotic, elusive and luxurious scents with perfectly common wildflowers. A little bird told me these were your favorite aroma-theraputic fragrances, and also informed me that you indulged the habit far too infrequently."

His deep voice was a pleased purr on Char's lips and face, and the younger man shivered at the sensations Kaecilius gave him effortlessly, at the same time he giggled. "I assume that the little bird is named *Ella*? Does this mean you've overcome your jealousy of her?"

"I may not be delighted that another person kissed your lips before I got a chance, but I have decided to forgive her. She wrote to me personally during her travels, and was extremely kind, encouraging my courtship. I am not quite sure how she managed to tell that we were still in the courtship phase, even after marrying…"

"She probably pieced it together from my own ridiculously confused letters." Char rested his cheek atop his hands, looking up at his husband with deceptively innocent eyes. "Could you get me that cloth, please?" He had decidedly ulterior motives for the request, which were rewarded immediately.

As if in a trance, Kaecilius nodded, showing off his god-like physique from new and highly flattering angles as his muscles flexed and Char noticed all sorts of details which were only fully visible when the other man was nude. Retrieving a soft, tan washcloth from a wooden shelf beside the tub, Kaecilius was so wrapped up in Char that he had no concept of how he *looked*....rivulets of water and foamy streams of soap dripping from his firm body...

Yet despite his shocking beauty, Kae looked nervous. He slid close to Char in the magically long-lasting, warm water and cupped his face.

“I know it’s your first time making love. I want to make it good for you, Charmont. I want so badly to be the man you deserve, to give you the pleasure which your body needs, so long deprived…too long, for one of your beauty, grace and sweetness.”

“Darling,” Char sighed, overwhelmed by the praise that made him feel that submissive, comforting arousal again. “But of course you’re the man I deserve. It causes me indescribable pleasure simply to kiss you, and to see you…ahem…*unclothed.*” Char raised his eyebrows. Kae’s cheeks turned pink and he gave his husband a little splash.

“*And,*” Char smirked, reaching behind Kae to begin carefully unbinding his hair, “to know that you desire me so deeply.” He smiled more seriously and took the older man’s hand, then placed it over his heart.

“Darling Husband.” Char shook his head, letting Kae feel the racing, thundering slam of his heart. “I just long to be with you. I want to gaze upon your face, make you smile and laugh, see and feel your genuine passion unleashed. I want all the things you want. And that’s truly a once in a lifetime bit of magic. Don’t you think?”

“You are more of magic than anything that I’ve conjured in my life,” Kaecilius assured him gruffly, on the verge of both tears and surrendering to feral lust. Their mutual arousal and affection matched so ideally, it was surreal.

“You’re sweet, Kaecilius, former ruler of the Dark Dimension and current holder of my heart. Make love to me?” Char stroked his fingers through his husband’s dampening, long hair, setting the ties aside which had bound it. He set the locks free and kept playing with them, finding the silver strands beautiful.

This particular, attentive touch seemed to touch a raw, erotic nerve in Kae, and Char realized he’d not been touched intimately in a long time, longer than he himself had suspected. Even romantic touches which were barely sexual in and of themselves were driving him quietly mad.

“I don’t know anything about how to do this,” Char confided in an embarrassed whisper. He sank his little fanged teeth into his plush lips again, tasting the fuller, swollen way Kae’s kisses had left them. “I think I should be the only one to worry about not making this everything it should be.”

“It should be you and me,” Kae answered, gentle and deeply sexual all at once. He kissed Char as the younger man rested both hands on his chest, sinking into chest hair, groping his pecs and then playing with Kaicilius’ hardening nipples.

Everything between them felt wet, slippery, and perfect. “You and me,” Char repeated, his smile fading into a look of sheer adoration and need as Kaecilius accompanied their next kiss with the touch of his big hand under the water, squeezing Char’s thigh and caressing slowly upwards.

Char gasped and closed his eyes. “Kae– oh, please, touch me.”

“You’ll make a wreck of me at that rate, my beautiful little husband. Please, have some mercy. It’s not as if I can say no to you, or even as if I wished to…” He brushed the back of his hand against Char’s hard cock, tantalizing touches that sent flickering, ecstatic fire through his husband’s body.

“I do feel small here, like this, with you…” Char kissed Kaecilius’ neck and started, nibbling more wetly when his husband finally took him in hand. “Knowing I’ll be yours to take care of…”

“Yes, my love, exactly. It’s my dream come true. Let me just find all your special places and what makes you fall apart, and then give it to you…until you lose your voice from crying out in pleasure…” He circled Char’s hardness underwater and firmly stroked.

“Great Gods, Kae…oh, that feels! Ahh, how I wanted your hands on me….”

Kaecilius found himself undone by Char’s sweet kisses on his neck, punctuated by curious, experimental bites. Two lovely, soft hands rested on his strong thighs, massaging them as Char parted his lips and flicked his tongue over Kae’s skin. Meanwhile, the way his husband responded with gasping sensitivity and pleas for more, with every touch and stroke of his beautiful cock, ensured that Kaecilius could never get enough of this.

“Sweet boy,” Kaecilius smiled, “That’s it, just give in…come here, even closer, I want to feel us together.”

He moved his hand from Char’s aching erection just for a moment, gasping at the needy little moan the younger men let out. “You are testing my restraint, naughty boy,” Kae growled. “Here, like this.”

Smoothly, he guided Char nearly into his lap, the King’s long, pretty legs around his thighs as he took them both in his large hand this time, pressed together. Char hissed in surprised ecstasy, clinging to Kae’s arms with his slippery, trembling fingers.

The young King’s dreamy blue eyes rolled back and his lips fell open, kiss-reddened and luscious to Kaecilius’ gaze.

“You’re like pure silk, Charmont,” Kaecilius marveled, holding their throbbing cocks together and slowly fucking his fist with them.

Precum slickened the glide, even in the water, as the flow of pearly desire was so generous between the two of them. “So beautifully sensitive and hard for me…” Kaecilius shivered, staring down at their wet cock-heads held flush while he stroked, running his thumb over each of their slits. “Holy fuck, sweetheart, yes…”

“Y-you’re so much bigger than me,” Char struggled to state, both highly pleased and slightly humbled by the fact.

His own cock was average sized, from anything he had ever read, and yet Kaecilius had several thick inches on him. Trembling harder with the fearful, yet all-encompassing, ardent desire to be full with his husband, Char begged for just that rather shamelessly.

“And might I taste you first, Kae?” Water clung to his long, dark lashes as Kaecilius moaned and lifted up to sit on the side of the tub.

With an angelic smile, Char soon knelt, smoothing his hands over Kaecilius’ knees and thighs as he slid the huge, hot hard-on into his tight, small mouth. “Mmmm,” he moaned immediately, sucking and tasting more, sweeping his pretty pink tongue over the head and taking in the precum, the flavor of Kae’s need for him. “Kae, you’re so – so perfect –” Staring up at his husband’s wildly undone expression, he glowed with delight in his work.

The encouragement emboldened him to learn as he went, stroking Kaecilius’ cock as his husband had done earlier to them both. He alternated between pumping up and down and then licking, tracing a vein, sweetly kissing and even lightly sucking Kae’s balls as he stroked again. During the course of this, Kaecilius showed he was as sensitive and touch-starved as Char, groaning deeply and fighting the urge to fuck hard into Char’s mouth.

“You may be rougher with me, more thorough…?” Char raised his brows and smiled, belatedly realizing his lips were glazed in precum and he looked positively sinful, debauched and tempting.

“I could, dear boy, but I won’t this time. It is my deepest desire to thrust into your perfect body and make you completely my own, once and for all, and ever after. I have to contain myself, or I’ll…spend myself thoroughly before I can feel your tight walls clenching around my girth.”

The frank description, not even particularly dirty in phrasing, but just so blunt, so sincerely, desperately lustful, made Char moan softly and rest his face on Kaecilius’ thigh with a warm kiss.

“Yes, please…it’s what I’ve been fantasizing about from the start…please, take me, husband. Make me yours.”

Kaecilius was only too happy to comply. He tenderly guided Char to stand and then bend over, holding the side of the tub for dear life as Kae firmly groped and parted his plush ass cheeks. The older man pressed his mouth to Char’s pink, virginal hole with a heady sigh, and when the teasing brush of warm lips made the younger man gasp and curse, Kae began licking at him. He used every ounce of skill and longing within him to make it good for his King, his adorably sexy and perfectly gorgeous husband, as he had so wanted to do.

No one deserved this pleasure more than his delicious, sensuous Charmont, and Kae told him so in no uncertain terms, licking and sucking, gently pressing his tongue inside his husband. Char cried out in blissful shock, which earned him a good, firm slap to his ass as Kae growled and kept lapping as his entrance gradually relaxed.

“Ouch!” Char grinned, looking over his shoulder as his husband cupped and squeezed his ass, admiring how pink it was from the warm water. “Whatever was that for?”

He still stroked back and forth in delighted fascination over Char's fluttering hole, but now he lifted his eyes to the younger man's. Kae's lips were wet from his ministrations as he replied cheerfully.

"That is for every time you've sassed me since we met."

Char pouted, his eyes sparkling. "Really? And that's my only punishment?"

"You're right, after all, darling. You really gave me a hard time on many occasions. Arguing and giving me that very pout, there must be stronger consequences."

While Char had expected to receive a more thorough spanking right where he was, instead, he yelped when Kaecilius adroitly climbed out of the bath and suddenly hoisted his husband right over his shoulder. He carried Char off like a vandal abducting a damsel in distress, with no further comment.

Char had a good time pretending to be irritated that he was slung over Kae's broad, naked shoulder like a parcel of goods. "I'm not your daily shopping bag from the village market!"

To accentuate the joking point, he "pounded" his fists on Kae's back and "wriggled around trying to escape." Kaecilius merely clucked his tongue, having briskly conveyed Char to the four-poster bed in a nearby room. It was a delightfully quaint and adorable room. But Char could not stop to appreciate the thoughtful decor as his husband casually dropped him onto the soft bed.

"Pardon me, just what do you think you're doing?" He demanded, scrambling to a sitting position, his hard cock on bold display as Kaecilius watched him licking his lips.

"This," replied Kae nonchalantly. He sat down and dragged Char easily over his knee, where he commenced the more thorough spanking with great enthusiasm.

"Kaeee," Char moaned, and now he really did try to wriggle away, even if his heart wasn't in it. He wanted to be stopped and made to take his good-natured punishment, to be controlled as only Kaecilius could. "That's enough, now. It hurts."

"That's the whole point, my dear. If it didn't hurt, how would you ever learn your lesson? And I've got something else to teach you about, too."

Soon enough, Char was gripping the bedding with a vice hold while Kaecilus spanked him hard, using his free hand to begin sliding his thick fingers slowly into his boy's hole. The penetration made lightning shoot up and down Char's spine as his cock grew even harder. Getting spanked at the same time combined pleasure and pain in a way that made Char lose his mind and drool onto the bed, his lower body jolted up with every firm slap that made his cheeks wobble.

"Your hands," Char moaned helplessly, as his tears of blissful sensitivity made Kaecilius' lust more all-consuming. "Oh, Kae, your hands on my body…it's everything I need."

“You’re stunning,” Kaecilius said simply, seriously, despite all of their lustful mischief. “Charmont…you’re beautiful like this.”

He lifted his husband easily and arranged Char comfortably, belly down on the delightfully soft bed. Kaecilius kissed Char’s ass where he had spanked it, sighing what a good boy his beloved had been.

Finally, he repositioned them so that Char lay on his back beneath him, finding his boy as pliant and dependent on his spouse’s best judgment as he could ever dream. He might have coyly remarked on knowing Char would let him do anything in the world he liked, be it pleasure, pain, or simply indulging some kinky fantasy of his own.

But he felt quite overwhelmed by affection because of how sweetly Char succumbed to his every whim, how wonderfully brave Char was in offering himself, body and soul. Once they had both feared this intimacy, and now they dove in whole-heartedly.

“I still feel I ought to pinch myself at finding you beneath me, longing for the same completion I crave.”

Char dreamily chased his husband’s serious, romantic smile. “I’m very real, and very much in love with you, I promise.”

This felt like the wedding vows they ought to have exchanged on the big day, not having realized then how deep their connection was to become. Entwined and throbbing against each other with need, they kissed, and Kaecilius lined himself up to Char’s hole. He had used his magic rather self-indulgently to add more lubrication, rendering them both slick and ready. His breath caught at the pleasure of just barely beginning to press the head of his cock into that tight, velvety heaven.

“Charmont…how could you be mine?”

“Like this.” Char kissed the dark purple rings around Kaecilius’ eyes, dispelling any lingering doubt in his husband’s mind. He could tell that Kae was still self-conscious about the markings left behind by his past mistakes and depraved adventures.

But he was perfect in his dear King’s blue eyes. Rough-hewn, battle-hardened, gentlemanly, strong and caring.

He really was all that Char could dream of in a lover, and perhaps Char had feared the impossibility of this more than anything, since they met. But he was past it now, accepting what they were as it came to full, trembling, pleasure-bright fruition.

“And, like *this*…” Char wrapped his arms and legs tightly around Kaecilius and pressed down on Kae’s toned ass with his ankles, easing the older man deeper inside him.

They both let out loud groans of euphoria, then began moving together perfectly, as Kae glided smoothly in and out of Char, who learned quickly how to take all his husband had to give and then some. Before long, thanks to Char’s wild begging, Kaecilius was pounding him

full-force into the bed, growling one moment, biting Char's neck obsessively, and the next moment gasping his love into Char's ear.

He repeated his love as he burst deep inside of Char, his warm seed filling the boy. Char's hole clenched even more tightly around Kae's thick cock when he felt the hot pulse of this ultimate claiming of him. He was flung over the precipice of his own orgasm a heartbeat later, raking his nails down Kae's back and tugging at the sorcerer's beautiful, long silver hair. Sweating, panting and quivering from head to toe with overheated, shocked pleasure, Char held Kaecilius soothingly, helping the older man to come down from the heights of bliss.

Kaecilius cried a bit into Char's shoulder, not needing to say aloud how he had once feared never to love again, much less to find a soulmate in the last place he expected. Char kissed his forehead and hugged him close, keeping Kae inside as long as he could.

Afterwards, they lay side by side as moonlight spilled in through the open window over the bed. It painted their sated bodies with a magical-looking glimmer as they took deep breaths and smiled at each other.

"You know," Kaecilius grinned after they got the ability to speak back, albeit with hoarse voices from all of their pleasured cries. "I think I like arguing with *you* more than speaking on any subject to anyone *else* in existence. You're intolerably adorable when you become flustered and indignant. No wonder you stole my heart so quickly."

"It's a talent of mine," Char answered in lazy, besotted contentment. He climbed his husband like a tree and lay over him as a royal blanket, and Kaecilius stroked his long, big fingers through Char's soft, rumpled curls. "Although not the only one."

"It *is* impressive." Kaecilius' eyes glittered with new playfulness and something quite a bit darker as the room dimmed, night deepening around them. In their special hideaway, he caressed and groped Char knowingly, running his hands down the boy's beautiful back and cupping his soft ass. "But you have many other talents, as you mentioned. Perhaps some we've yet to fully explore."

"Mmm," Char giggled, perking up at Kae's insinuation. He'd been ready to go to sleep, but now, he decided he would prefer for Kaecilius to put him into a perfectly delightful, deep slumber till morning. "In that case, my love, explore me to your heart's content. Never stop… promise me that."

Kaecilius had never made an easier promise.

End Notes

Next time: Char visits Kaecilius to apologize for his assumptions, and the two bond more while….*making snacks?* Later, Kaecilius offers Char a swoon-worthy gift. But an appearance from an old enemy (with whom you *may* be familiar) brings serious danger. And Char and Kaecilius will realize just how strongly they feel about one another…🥺

Sweet and Smutty HEU series playlist:
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